

COMBATING MILITANT ISLAMISM WITH PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS:
INFLUENCING ADVERSARY BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

This research serves as an evaluation of the United States' Psychological Operations (PSYOP) strategy in combating militant Islamist groups. Department of Defense doctrinal publications are the authority in this thesis for defining PSYOP. The research considers past U.S. employment of PSYOP to demonstrate its plausible effectiveness in achieving national security objectives. Analysis supports the idea of PSYOP being an appropriate means to combat militant Islamism. A thorough look into the authoritative texts that militant Islamist groups use to support their ideology leads to the conclusion that the U.S.'s current employment of PSYOP is misdirected and subsequently ineffective. The researcher concludes that an alternative approach involving the use of PSYOP to discredit the militants' stated ideological source, namely the Quran and Hadith, rather than attempting to simply discredit their interpretation of the texts, would be more effective in influencing adversarial thoughts and behavior to support U.S. national security objectives.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION - A BATTLE OF IDEOLOGIES

In light of new information, ideas can be supported, stifled, or replaced. Assuming the recipient of new information is capable of reasoning to logical conclusions, clearly true information should supplant clearly false information and a change of mind – a change of ideas – should occur. The war against Al Qaeda, the Islamic State (IS) and other likeminded groups is ultimately a war of ideologies – systems of ideas and ideals. Harmful, violent “ideologies are not defeated with guns; they are defeated by better ideas and [a] more attractive and more compelling vision.”¹ This was the sentiment promoted by former president Barak Obama in the summer of 2015 after consulting with military leaders at the Pentagon. The then Commander in Chief recognized that the real target in the war against terror was not one that could be eliminated with bombs or guns; it was one that lay within the mind. Ideas can live on even after the brains that produced them cease to function. An adversarial ideology, simply a set of ideas counter or opposed to one’s own, cannot be bombed out of existence; it must be thoroughly discredited and replaced. Since the beginning of the century the United States has been at war with militant Islamist ideology. The 2011 National Strategy for Counterterrorism highlighted the undermining, inhibiting,

Policy Review

¹ “Iraq-Syria solution will need more than bombs and boots,” The Christian Science Monitor, Last modified July 7, 2015, <<http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/the-monitors-view/2015/0707/Iraq-Syria-solution-will-need-more-than-bombs-and-boots>>

and countering of a specific ideology as an essential element for success in the war on terror.²

This is true regardless of which group is espousing the ideology in question because the ideology or worldview espoused by all militant Islamist groups is one which strives for the global establishment of Islam and the supremacy of Islamic law.³

In the years following the attacks of 2001, “special teams at U.S. Treasury identified [Bin Laden’s] funding sources and, one by one, cut them off [and] Special Forces found, killed or captured his commanders, including the 9-11 mastermind himself, Khalid Shaikh Mohammed.”⁴ Through a combination of targeted airstrikes assisted by the successful recruitment of spies inside the terrorist group’s network, Al Qaeda’s leadership became so depleted “that it lacked the ability to plan and prosecute large-scale attacks.”⁵ This eventually led to a significant milestone in the United States’ success against Al Qaeda – the death of Osama Bin Laden in 2011. While the organizational effectiveness of Al Qaeda was significantly reduced, the group’s ideology and the violence that stemmed from it continued to thrive through its affiliates. This fact reveals that the war on terror is not simply a manhunt. Al Qaeda and like-minded groups are not fueled by one man, but by a system of ideas – an ideology. Therefore, focusing efforts on one or even on multiple key individuals will not overcome the ideology that fuels terror. Killing Osama Bin Laden did not end the

² Barak Obama. *National Strategy for Counterterrorism*, June 2011, Retrieved from <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/counterterrorism_strategy.pdf>

³ Anthony Celso. *Al-Qaeda’s Post-9/11 Devolution: The Failed Jihadist Struggle Against the Near and Far Enemy*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014 Pg 15

⁴ Richard Miniter, “The U.S. Killed Bin Laden Six Year Ago Today. Did It Matter?”, Forbes. May 02, 2017, <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/richardminiter/2017/05/02/the-u-s-killed-bin-laden-six-years-ago-today-did-it-matter/#68e9ef121771>>

⁵ Ibid., para. 7

war against the ideology that fueled Al Qaeda, which is now led by Ayman al-Zawahiri. In a similar way, killing Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and bombing the self-proclaimed Caliphate out of existence will not end the war against the ideology that fuels the Islamic State. The 2018 Summary of the US National Defense Strategy concedes that despite the defeat of IS's physical caliphate, "terrorism remains a persistent condition driven by ideology."⁶ The United States must thoroughly discredit the ideology that unites these militant Islamist groups. Herein lies the greatest failure of the United States' war against militant Islamist ideology; the United States has failed to develop and execute to the extent of its capabilities a successful counter-ideological strategy. A successful strategy is not necessarily defined as militant Islamists completely forsaking their religious ideology; a strategy would be considered successful if it generated enough doubt in the minds of the militants that, while having not completely forsaken their ideology, they are less motivated to kill and die for it.

In the same way that cancer is not eliminated simply by cutting out a tumor, militant Islamist groups will not be defeated by simply cutting out their leadership or even by destroying the majority of a group's resources. While such events may lead to a temporary repose in terrorist activity and a subsequent change in a group's name, the set of ideas that compels these groups will continue to spread like cancer. Cancer cells have to be destroyed wherever they have spread and measures must be taken to keep the cancer from returning. Former Secretary of Defense Ash Carter suggested that the same holds true for the system of

⁶ James Mattis. "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America." Department of Defense. p. 3 Retrieved from <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>

ideas that fuels militant Islamist groups.⁷ In the given analogy, the cancer cells are the ideas that motivate the militant Islamists. We do not have enough resources (personnel, time, bullets, bombs) to eliminate every individual who adheres to militant Islamist ideas. Therefore, we must relentlessly attack the ideology itself. Fredrick Kagan, a former professor of military history at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, explained that while some enemies must be killed and others captured, the overwhelming majority must be persuaded.⁸ Large scale destruction and death is often enough to persuade an adversary to abandon its ideas and aspirations. However, with their perceived divine mandate, militant Islamists are different. What is needed is a psychological persuasion campaign which exerts influence on militant Islamist attitudes and beliefs by appeals to logic and reason, resulting in unshakeable doubt which subsequently quells their militant behavior.⁹ The United States' PSYOP efforts against militant Islamist groups have failed to elicit sufficient doubt and therefore have failed to change a sufficient number of militant minds.

⁷ Terri Cronk. "Carter Outlines Counter-ISIL Campaign Plan in Paris." DoD News, Defense Media Activity. Jan 21, 2016. < <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/643943/carter-outlines-counter-isil-campaign-plan-in-paris/>>

⁸ Frederick W. Kagan, "War and Aftermath," *Policy Review*, 120 (2003).
<users.clas.ufl.edu/zselden/Course%20Readings/FKagan.pdf>

⁹ Daniel Schacter, Daniel T. Gilbert, and Daniel M. Wegner. *Psychology, Second Edition*. Worth Publishers, 2010

CHAPTER II

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Following a review of current literature, the research begins by evaluating past U.S. PSYOP persuasion efforts in order to assess the validity of such efforts and determine whether or not they are appropriate in the battle against militant Islamism. It serves, therefore, to show the utility of PSYOP in overcoming an adversarial ideology. It focuses on the equally injurious ideology of Soviet communism and highlights how psychological operations were employed to thoroughly discredit the Soviet ideology and assist in the ultimate collapse of the Soviet state.

A proper persuasion campaign must be founded on a proper understanding what one's adversary truly believes as well as a proper understanding of the professed foundation upon which those beliefs are built. In order to propose a successful counter-ideological message, one must have robust and accurate knowledge of the targeted ideology. Therefore, after discussing the utility of psychological persuasion campaigns, the research moves into a twofold methodology. First, in order to develop a clear understanding of what the Islamic State and likeminded groups believe, this research will explore the militants' own self-published literature, namely *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*. The magazine series *Dabiq* is the Islamic State's first of such magazines in which the militants depict the group as they see themselves.¹⁰ In addition to boasting of victories, detailing life in the Caliphate, and

¹⁰ David Harris (2014) Islamic State Selling Message With Glossy English Magazine. Clarion project. <https://clarionproject.org/islamic-state-selling-message-glossy-english-magazine/>

encouraging its supporters, *Dabiq* explains the beliefs of the Islamic State in the simplest terms while asserting the validity of its understanding or interpretation of authoritative texts in order to build the group's legitimacy throughout the Muslim world. In a similar fashion, *Rumiyah* "puts forward the group's political and theological stance, explaining why opposition to the group is heretical."¹¹ This part of the research will allow the reader to clearly identify what IS and other likeminded militant Islamist groups consider to be their set of core beliefs. It would be a waste of effort in ideological warfare to refute something that one's adversary does not believe in the first place.

The second phase in this research methodology involves gaining a clear understanding of the foundation upon which militant Islamists claim their ideology – their set of core beliefs – is built. In the spirit of Renaissance humanism and the cry of "*ad fontes*" ("to the sources"), this part of the research will require a deep dive into the actual authoritative sources that, as claimed by militant Islamists themselves, support their ideology. Just because a person or group claims inspiration from a certain source, it does not necessarily follow that they indeed are consistent with, or in compliance with, the supposed source of inspiration. Therefore, this section will aim to answer the question of whether or not groups like IS are consistent in their worldview. The results of this research should set the direction of any psychological operations campaign unleashed against militant Islamists. The logic behind this phase of research is as follows:

Group [X] possess **beliefs [A]** and acts according to those beliefs (against U.S. interests)
- **[X]** claims **[A]** is supported/inspired by recognized **authority [Z]**
- Teachings of **[Z]** clearly contradict **[A]** and concomitant behavior/actions

¹¹ Clarion Project. "Islamic State's (ISIS, ISIL) Horrific Magazine." Sept 2014.
<https://clarionproject.org/islamic-state-isis-isil-propaganda-magazine-dabiq-50/>

Psychological Operations Tactic:

- Refute misconceptions of **Group [X]** by revealing error in **beliefs [A]** via an appeal to **authority [Z]**, ideally resulting in a change of behavior in line with U.S. interests

Or

Group [X] possess **beliefs [A]** and acts according to those beliefs (against U.S. interests)

- **[X]** claims **[A]** is supported/inspired by recognized **authority [Z]**
- Teachings of **[Z]** appear to support **[A]** and concomitant behavior/actions

Psychological Operations tactic:

- Refute **authority [Z]** (show it to be false); behavior resulting from **beliefs [A]** subsequently loses its justification/validity; **Group [X]** loses members due to apathy or apostasy which favors U.S. interests

CHAPTER III

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Stephen C. Coughlin's thesis, *To Our Great Detriment: Ignoring What Extremists Say About Jihad*, submitted to the faculty of the National Defense Intelligence College, considers how the Intelligence Community determines "what motivates and animates the enemy in order to clarify the jihadi threat."¹² The author argues that U.S. authorities and decision makers have a faulty understanding of the nature of the enemy and his declared strategic doctrine. Coughlin's thesis aims to answer three questions: 1) Why have we failed to do a doctrine-based threat assessment? 2) What is the doctrinal basis of the jihad threat? 3) How can we come to understand the jihadi threat?¹³ Coughlin concludes his research by suggesting a methodology to design a counterterrorism approach without specifically proposing an approach. Furthermore, his only mention of information related capabilities (ie. PSYOP) is attributed to the enemy's use of such capabilities. The utility of Coughlin's work to this current research paper is rooted in his reliance on authoritative Islamic sources which he uses to demonstrate how militant Islamists justify their beliefs and behavior.

In his paper titled *A National Strategy To Win the War Against Islamist Terror*, Michael McCaul outlines a counterterrorism strategy in light of the United States' failure to secure a decisive victory against a threat that is not defined by "a specific group, but rather a worldwide movement driven by an insidious ideology and with an evolving mix of

¹² Stephen C. Coughlin, "To Our Great Detriment: Ignoring What Extremists Say About Jihad." *National Defense Intelligence College*. (2007), p 2

¹³ Ibid., p. 3

combatants and adherents.”¹⁴ The author operates from the viewpoint that Islamist terrorists have “perverted a major religion into a hateful worldview,” a sentiment that is expressed multiple times throughout the paper.¹⁵ While the paper, released by the Homeland Security Committee, does address the ideological foundation that unites militant Islamist groups, it fails to provide a thorough ideological approach to solving the issue at hand. As part of the author’s suggested strategy, he includes the self-evident requirement of “developing a counter-messaging program specifically targeting Islamist terrorism.”¹⁶ The only detail he contributes to this counter-messaging program is that it must focus on empowering credible voices. These supposedly credible voices include: former extremists, family members affected by terror, and moderate religious figures. McCaul fails to address by what standard he assesses these people to be “credible” and subsequently proposes a list of individuals whose potential to dissuade jihadis or budding jihadis is questionable. The paper would have benefited from an explanation on how, according to the author’s reasoning, a family member who has lost a loved one due to an act of terror could dissuade jihadis or budding jihadis from committing further acts of terror.

Alex P. Schmid’s research paper, *Challenging the Narrative of the “Islamic State,”* was published by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism. The author examines multiple IS themes from various angles, to include theological and historical, in order to identify potential vulnerabilities in the group’s ideology with the goal of developing convincing counter-arguments. Schmid astutely states that military force alone is not enough

¹⁴ Michael. McCaul. “A National Strategy to Win the War Against Islamist Terror.” *House Homeland Security Committee*. (2016), p. 5

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 5

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 15

to break the momentum of IS; a “counter-narrative that can seriously challenge and undermine the narrative of IS” is also needed.¹⁷ Within his paper, Schmid presents twelve claims propagated by IS and follows each with argumentative elements for possible incorporation into a counter-message. He correctly recognizes that “a multiplicity of Muslim interpretations exists on the Quran, on Muhammad’s exemplary way of life and on Islamic law”¹⁸ and that for “almost every example [of violence] one can find a counter-example and, in some cases, even a counter-counter-example.”¹⁹ Taking Schmid’s words to their logical conclusion, these statements concede that examples indeed exist in the Quran to support at least some of IS’s themes. Schmid ultimately proposes counter/alternative narratives that attempt to use self-interest (ie. keep your life) and the “inner voice of humanity” in order to appeal to “vulnerable/rebellious young Muslims.”²⁰ While such a tactic may work on “rebellious young Muslims” it is doubtful to have an impact on those who already accept IS’s ideology as divinely sanctioned truth. A counter-message would have to demonstrate a) that IS’s ideology is false and b) it is in one’s interest to believe that which is true and reject that which is false.

In his 2009 paper *Terrorist Drop-outs: One Way of Promoting a Counter-Narrative*, Michael Jacobson attempts to demonstrate that former terrorists are the most effective and credible voice for delivering a counter-narrative to terrorists of the Islamic ilk, ie. militant Islamists. He makes many valid points and identifies, what this researcher considers,

¹⁷ Alex P. Schmid, “Challenging the Narrative of the “Islamic State”” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*. (2015), p 2

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 4

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 6

²⁰ Ibid., p. 14

prerequisites for a successful psychological operations approach. First, Jacobson recognizes the importance of the “battle of ideas” in winning the war against militant Islamism.²¹ He understands that whatever ideas are presented to militant Islamists, they must have a stronger appeal than the ideas that the militants already accept. The author suggests that an effective counter-narrative must appeal to “not only those vulnerable to the extremist message, but also those on the path toward radicalization, and those already radicalized.”²² A final point made by Jacobson, with which this researcher strongly agrees, is that the U.S. government is not always the most effective messenger for a counter-narrative.²³ In regards to the specifics of his proposed counter-narrative, Jacobson misses the mark. He suggests a “naming and shaming” approach to undermine and generate a lack of respect for a terrorist group’s leadership.²⁴ As an example, Jacobson references a video released by the U.S. government in 2006 showing Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s ineptness in handling a certain firearm. While this approach may affect how a militant Islamist views a particular leader, it does not affect the ideas that he holds which makes him a militant Islamist in the first place. An effective psychological operation should change a militant’s mind about his militancy, not about his leaders. Jacobson suggests an additional approach which involves “demonstrating civilian and Muslim suffering at the hands of terrorist.”²⁵ The problem with this suggestion is that groups like al-Qaeda and IS consider civilian populations valid targets and justify killing

²¹ Michael Jacobson, “Terrorist Drop-outs: One Way of Promoting a Counter-Narrative.” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Volume, 3, Number 2 (25 November 2010)

²² *Ibid.*, p. 12

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 15

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13

professing Muslims by deeming them as apostates deserving of death. These militant Islamist particulars will be discussed in a later chapter. Fear is another factor that Jacobson thinks should be part of a counter-narrative.²⁶ Once again, while fear may influence a person to act or not act in a certain way at a given time, it is unlikely to challenge the beliefs and ideas that actually make a Muslim a militant Islamist. Despite the unconvincing nature of Jacobson's counter-narrative details, several of his counter-narrative prerequisites will be included in the PSYOP approach proposed in this paper.

Dr. Coyt Hargus authored an admirable paper titled *Islamic Radicalization and the Global Islamist Movement: Protecting U.S. National Interests by Understanding and Countering Islamist Grand Strategy With U.S. Policy* which he subsequently published through the Joint Advanced Warfighting School. In his paper Dr. Hargus examines the "Global Islamist Movement's historic and theological foundations, its ideology, and its published strategy in order to argue the enduring nature of the movement's threat to U.S. interests globally."²⁷ Dr. Hargus goes against the grain of the accepted narrative that claims militant Islamists are so removed from proper Islamic doctrine as to be considered non-Islamic and he instead concludes that their "core values are centered on the Quran, its accompanying exegesis documents, and the established corpus of laws known collectively as *Sharia*."²⁸ The author does an excellent job of relating national security strategy with objective perspectives on religious interpretation. While Dr. Hargus explains the various

²⁶ Jacobson, p. 15

²⁷ Coyt Hargus. "Islamic Radicalization and the Global Isalmist Movement: Protecting U.S. National Interests by Understanding and Countering Islamist Grand Strategy With U.S. Policy." *National Defense University, Joint Forces Staff College, Joint Advanced Warfighting School*. (2013), p. ii

²⁸ Ibid., p. 33

authoritative sources, to include the authoritative exegetes (*mufasssireen*), he opts not to provide their actual exegesis of relevant Quranic passages as part of his thesis paper. The reader is forced to therefore draw his own conclusions regarding the meaning of Quranic passages provided by Dr. Hargus. This leaves too much room for subjectivity and therefore any conclusions reached by the reader would be viewed as unqualified, unauthoritative and ultimately irrelevant. Analysis of foundational Islamic texts, buttressed by authoritative commentaries (*tafsir*) from Islamic scholars renowned and respected throughout history, would have greatly improved Dr. Hargus' already impressive work. In Chapter VI of this paper, I explain why *tafsir* is considered authoritative and demonstrate that, despite being separated by centuries and even espousing certain theological differences (Sunni vs Shia), there is much consensus among the *mufasireen* (authors of *tafsir*) in their commentaries.

In *Decoding Al-Qaeda's Strategy*, Michael W.S. Ryan links militant Islamist strategy with that of Maoist guerrilla warfare. He argues that groups like Al-Qaeda have little in common with mainstream Islam. Among scholars there are no doubts regarding the validity of this argument. Militant Islamist groups themselves proudly claim to have little in common with mainstream Islam, which they view as heretical and, in the spirit of *takfir*, downright apostasy. Despite the claims on the publisher's page that Ryan's research shows that the strategy of groups like al-Qaeda is a "largely secular departure from the classic Muslim conception of jihad,"²⁹ Ryan himself writes that jihadists use "an equally valid interpretation of the word jihad"³⁰ and that in Muhammad's own understanding of jihad "the violent

²⁹ Columbia University Press. "Decoding Al-Qaeda's Strategy." <<https://cup.columbia.edu/book/decoding-alqaedas-strategy/9780231163842>>

³⁰ Michael W. S. Ryan. *Decoding Al-Qaeda's Strategy: The Deep Battle Against America*. Columbia University Press, 2013 p. 24

meaning crowds out other meanings.”³¹ This book supports the thesis of this research paper as it pertains to the war of ideas and the inability of bullets and bombs to completely solve the problem of militant Islamism. Ryan, discussing the deep battle of ideas, claims “though American bullets cut down Osama bin Laden, global jihad is a powerful idea with a life of its own, one that bullets cannot touch.”³²

Similar to Ryan’s book, Paul Berman links militant Islamism to more contemporary totalitarian ideologies in his book *Terror and Liberalism*. Berman suggests that radical Islamism is purely a reaction against Western liberalism rather than being rooted in fundamental Islamic ideology. He provides thorough analysis of a leading contemporary Islamist philosopher, Sayyid Qutb, though he fails to appeal to authoritative Islamic texts to support his dismissal of militant Islamism’s connection with the overarching religious ideology of Islam. In this thesis paper numerous *tafsir* (authoritative exegesis) will be cited in order to clarify difficult Quranic passages.

³¹ Ryan, p. 25

³² Ibid., p. 2

CHAPTER IV

THE UTILITY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS

At this point it is appropriate to consider the utility of psychological operations (PSYOP), and whether or not PSYOP are an effective tool in supporting national security by persuading one's adversary. In December 2010, under the direction of then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, the term "psychological operations" was replaced with "military information support operations" (MISO) in order to "more accurately reflect and convey the nature" of such operations.³³ As a result, the 2010 Joint Publication 3-13.2 was republished almost two years after its original release. In the revised version the term "psychological operations" was replaced throughout the publication with "military information support operations" except when referencing past doctrine. It is the personal preference of this author to continue to use the term psychological operations in defining "planned operations to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals" (the definition of PSYOP in 2010 and currently the definition of MISO).³⁴

PSYOP are a core capability of information operations (IO). Within the framework of IO, PSYOP are considered an information related capability (IRC) and can be employed in

³³ "Joint Publication 3-13.2: Military Information Support Operations." *United States Joint Chiefs of Staff*, Jan 2010 (Incorporating Change 1 from Dec 2011), p. iii

³⁴ "Joint Publication 3-13.2: Psychological Operations *United States Joint Chiefs of Staff*, Jan 2010 p. GL-8

concert with other IRCs such as electronic warfare (EW), computer network operations (CNO), military deception (MILDEC) and operations security (OPSEC) to “influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp adversarial human and automated decision-making while protecting our own.”³⁵ One possible way of accomplishing this is through the conveyance of selected information to the target audience designed to effect the target’s emotions, reasoning abilities, and presuppositions. The U.S. Army Special Operations Command Public Affairs Office explains that psychological operations “rely on logic, fear, desire, or other mental factors to persuade and promote specific emotions, attitudes or behaviors.”³⁶ The ultimate desired outcome is a change in the target’s behavior favorable to the United States’ national security objectives.

History demonstrates that there is precedence in the Western world for employing psychological operations to counter an anti-western ideology. In 1948, British Foreign Secretary Earnest Bevin along with other individuals like Ivone Kirkpatrick, the Foreign Office Under Secretary responsible for information activities, proposed a plan to reinforce Western civilization against encroaching Soviet communist propaganda. The plan included going on the ideological offensive, which meant attacking and exposing the Soviet communist ideology and presenting “something far better.”³⁷ The Soviet ideologists at the time promoted a system of values and universal principles which they intended to spread as part of

³⁵ “Joint Publication 3-13.2: Psychological Operations *United States Joint Chiefs of Staff*, Jan 2010 p. ix

³⁶ “Military Information Support Operations Command (Airborne) (Provisional) Fact Sheet” U.S. Army Special Operations Command, p. 1 Retrieved from <http://www.soc.mil/MISOC/MISO%20fact%20sheet.pdf>

³⁷ Andrew Defty, “British anti-communist propaganda and cooperation with the United States, 1945-1951.” *University of Salford*, 2002, p. 77

some great historical, revolutionary enterprise.³⁸ The West's PSYOP strategy was to promote a counter-ideology, based on Democratic principles, intended to "expose the Soviet workers' paradise as a gigantic hoax."³⁹ There was initially concern that the staunch anti-Soviet aspect of the West's proposed PSYOP campaign might offend some Western socialists who, while politically communist, shared a Western-influenced worldview.⁴⁰ However, it was ultimately concluded that in order to be effective the PSYOP campaign must thoroughly criticize the communist ideology and Soviet policy.

The communist ideology drove the aggressive, subversive, and expansionist policies of the Soviet state. A change in ideology, it was thought, would lead to a change in policy and a reduction of tensions between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.. Therefore the U.S. invested heavily in ideological warfare with the goal of bankrupting the Soviet worldview. The combined U.S. and British PSYOP initiative in the 1950's was an ideological offensive which utilized information as a "propaganda weapon designed to win the cold war."⁴¹ The so-called Campaign for Truth was founded on the presupposition that Soviet communism was "a wicked system."⁴² Soviet intentions were clearly identified as being "inescapably militant" because they were fueled by a world-wide revolutionary ideology.⁴³ As some in the intelligence community at that time reasoned, there were only three alternatives in the cold

³⁸ Katharine C. Gorka and Patrick Sookhdeo, "Fighting the Ideological War: Winning Strategies from Communism to Islamism." McLean: Isaac Publishing, 2012

³⁹ Defty, p. 78

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 78

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 165

⁴² Ibid., p. 211

⁴³ Philip M Taylor, "Munitions of the Mind': A Brief History of Military Psychological Operations." *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*. 3. 2007 p. 257

war: surrender, World War III, or fighting world Communism to a standstill by means of psychological warfare.⁴⁴ A PSYOP campaign was designed to persuade the public, both behind the Iron Curtain and beyond, regarding the true nature of the Soviet ideology by concentrating “wholly on the negative, anti-Communist, anti-Soviet aspect” as well as highlighting its shortcomings as a viable worldview.⁴⁵ The results of this campaign are recorded in history books. While the collapse of the Soviet State was due in large part to its failure as a political and economic system, PSYOP nonetheless “lowered morale in the Communist ranks, induced defections, [and] increased people’s readiness to assist the West.”⁴⁶ Suffice it to say, the ideology of the Soviet Union lost the ideological war against Western democratic principles.

As demonstrated, a PSYOP campaign was waged relentlessly against an adversary who was viewed at the time as the United States’ ideological antithesis. In the face of another adversarial, revolutionary, militant ideology, the United States must once again go on the ideological offensive to expose another “gigantic hoax.” Despite differing from Soviet Communists in their lines of rationale along which they operate, at their core militant Islamists nonetheless hold certain things to be true for which they are willing to fight. By exposing these core truths to be false, or at least very probably false, a successful PSYOP campaign does not necessarily have to persuade militant Islamists to completely abandon their worldview, but simply make it less likely that they would be morally prepared to die for it. While history is replete with examples of people dying for something they believed in,

⁴⁴ John Brockmiller. “Psywar In Intelligence Operations.” *Studies in Intelligence* 5, no. 3 (Summer 1961), Retrieved from https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/vol5no3/html/v05i3a04p_0001.htm

⁴⁵ Defty, p. 213

⁴⁶ Brockmiller, para. 9

much fewer are the examples of people dying for something they knew to be, or at least thought was very possibly, false.

CHAPTER V

PHASE 1 – WHAT MILITANT ISLAMISTS CLAIM TO BELIEVE

For phase 1 of the research, the researcher reviewed the literature published by militant Islamists themselves, identifying and compiling into an outline their professed beliefs, strategies and goals. As this phase was not meant to produce a systematic theological breakdown of all beliefs held by militant Islamist groups, the outline of beliefs is not exhaustive. It focuses on those beliefs that directly impact or could potentially impact U.S. national security objectives. As an example, beliefs dealing with dietary restrictions, cleansing rituals, explanations of the natural world, and other similar beliefs are omitted from this section.

A common theme throughout militant Islamist literature is that various systems outside of Islam, whether they are political, social, economic or religious, are equated to pagan idolatry. This includes Catholicism, Protestantism, Orthodoxy, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, nationalism, democracy, capitalism, communism and fascism.⁴⁷ These systems, ideologies, and beliefs are all considered to be *kufir*, meaning disbelief. Leading the “camp of the Jews, the crusaders, their allies, and with them the rest of the nations and religions of *kufir*” are America and Russia.⁴⁸ The rationale behind this opposition to all other ideologies,

⁴⁷ Islamic State. “The Return of the Khilafah.” Dabiq, V. 1, 5 July 2014 p. 8; Islamic State. “Just Terror” Dabiq V 12 18 November 2015 p. 13 & 43

⁴⁸ Islamic State. “The Return of the Khilafah.” Dabiq, V. 1, 5 July 2014 p. 10

regardless of their nature, is that Allah alone is the only one to whom allegiance should be pledged – not a national symbol such as a flag and certainly not another divine being.⁴⁹

Militant Islamists claim that since the Messenger of Allah, Muhammad, was harsh towards the *kafiruna* (plural of *kafir*, ie. unbelievers), Muslims now should also be harsh towards unbelievers.⁵⁰ Intrinsically associated with unbelief is the idea of *shirk*, the deification or worship of anyone or anything besides the single Allah (as opposed to the Triune God of Christianity). Militant Islamists like IS believe that “committing *shirk* with Allah is a sin that makes one permissible to be killed.”⁵¹ They hold that the shedding of the blood of *mushrikun* (those who commit *shirk*) is necessary and a blessed deed.⁵² *Mushrikun* are to be struck down either until they enter into Islam or enter into *dhimmah* (protection) by paying the *jizyah* (religious tax) in humiliation.⁵³ Militant Islamists hold that for any *kafir* or *mushrik* “who is neither a *dhimmi* nor one who’s been granted security, regardless of whether he is a combatant or non-combatant, or whether he defames Islam or does not, or whether he transgresses against the blood, wealth, and honor of the Muslims or does not [...] Allah has commanded [Muslims] to fight.”⁵⁴ Those who do not adopt the

⁴⁹ Islamic State. “Just Terror” Dabiq V 12 18 November 2015 p. 34

⁵⁰ Islamic State. “From Hypocrisy to Apostasy: The Extinction of the Grayzone.” Dabiq V 7 12 February 2015 p. 32

⁵¹ Islamic State. “The Ruling of the Belligerent Christians.” Rumiyah V 9 4 May 2017 p. 5

⁵² Ibid, p. 5

⁵³ Islamic State. “From Hypocrisy to Apostasy: The Extinction of the Grayzone.” Dabiq V 7 12 February 2015 pg 24; Islamic State. “The Ruling of the Belligerent Christians.” Rumiyah V 9 4 May 2017, p. 5

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 6-7

religion of truth (ie. Islam) or refuse to subject themselves to its requirements are to be fought against; their necks are to be struck until slaughter has been inflicted upon them.⁵⁵

The 15th volume of the Islamic State's magazine *Dabiq* includes an article titled "Why We Hate You & Why We Fight You" in which IS presents in "unequivocal terms" why it hates and fights against the West. Leading the list of reasons is unbelief (absence of a belief) and disbelief (the rejection or abandonment of a belief). Rejecting Allah as god and refusing to worship him is the primary reason why IS hates an entire group of people. IS writes "just as your disbelief is the primary reason we hate you, your disbelief is the primary reason we fight you, as we have been commanded to fight the disbelievers until they submit to the authority of Islam."⁵⁶ This leads IS to conclude that even if the western nations were to cease their kinetic warfare against them, IS would nonetheless continue campaigns of terror until "there is no *fitnah* (paganism) and until religion, all of it, is for Allah."⁵⁷ The second reason given for the hatred and violence towards the West is that our secular societies "permit the very things that Allah has prohibited, while banning many of the things he has permitted."⁵⁸ The third reason, similar to the first, concerns once again the lack of belief, however the focus here is specifically on atheists because they "disbelieve in the existence of [the] Lord and Creator"⁵⁹ as opposed to followers of other religions who believe in a Creator, but reject the god of Islam.

⁵⁵ Islamic State. "From Hypocrisy to Apostasy: The Extinction of the Grayzone." *Dabiq* V. 7, 12 February 2015 p. 21

⁵⁶ Islamic State. "Break the Cross." *Dabiq* V. 15, 31 July 2016, p. 31

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31 15, 31

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 31-32

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32

Militant Islamists also claim that tacit approval of disbelief is itself disbelief.⁶⁰ They declare that any Muslims in close association with unbelievers are themselves *murtaddin* (apostates). Militant Islamist groups see it as their obligation to terrorize and kill apostates and any “tribe, party, or assembly that would support the crusaders.”⁶¹ They invoke the concept of *jahiliyah* (ignorance) when they condemn imams and scholars for calling on disbelievers to form an alliance against IS.⁶² *Jahiliyah*, in classical usage, is a term denoting the period of time before the advent of Islam; in contemporary usage it refers to secular modernity in the present-day Muslim world.⁶³ The Islamic State compares modern-day Muslims to “a hundred camels amongst which you almost can’t find any that are fit for riding.”⁶⁴ In their worldview, Muslims must work together to eradicate anything that inhibits complete submission to Allah. They stand committed to holding onto the purity, clarity and comprehensiveness of Islam while fighting those who have turned away or reject it until “the religion of Allah [is] triumphant over all other religions.”⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Islamic State. “From Hypocrisy to Apostasy: The Extinction of the Grayzone.” Dabiq V 7 12 February 2015 p. 60

⁶¹ Islamic State. “From Hypocrisy to Apostasy: The Extinction of the Grayzone.” Dabiq V 7 12 February 2015, p. 8; Islamic State. “The Return of the Khilafah.” Dabiq, V. 1, 5 July 2014 p 37

⁶² Islamic State. “Break the Cross” Dabiq, V. 15, 31 July 2016, p. 27

⁶³ Eleanor Abdella Doumato,. "Jāhiliyah." *In The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World.* , edited by John L. Esposito. Oxford Islamic Studies Online, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236MIW/e0406> (accessed 13-Sep-2018).

⁶⁴ Islamic State. “The Flood.” Dabiq V. 2, 27 July 2014, p. 10

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 11

Finally, groups like IS ridicule the West's slogan that "Islam is a religion of peace."⁶⁶ They mock the repetition of this statement claiming that the "evidence for [Islam being a religion of the sword] is so profuse that only a heretic would argue otherwise."⁶⁷ However, the leadership of IS and other militant Islamist groups recognizes the utility of this belief to their benefit even if they consider it false. They claim Muslims living in the west are in a position to cause great harm to the enemy.⁶⁸ They encourage followers to use deception to "trick one's target into believing that they are safe before killing them."⁶⁹ Deception is cited as being the most appropriate method for one seeking to slaughter large numbers of *kafiruna*.

The paragraphs above were meant to provide a brief summary of the beliefs professed by militant Islamist groups which directly impact or could potentially impact U.S. national security objectives. By citing the militants' own literature, and avoiding additional commentary about their publications, the author of this paper strove to capture the essence of their beliefs without misrepresentation or admixture of outsider interpretation.

⁶⁶ Islamic State. "From Hypocrisy to Apostasy: The Extinction of the Grayzone." Dabiq V 7 12 February 2015 p. 20

⁶⁷ Islamic State. "From Hypocrisy to Apostasy: The Extinction of the Grayzone." Dabiq V 7 12 February 2015 p. 20

⁶⁸ Al-Qaeda. "May Our Souls Be Sacrificed for you." Inspire. Summer 2010, p. 17

⁶⁹ Islamic State. "The Ruling of the Belligerent Christians." Rumiya V 9 4 May p. 48

CHAPTER VI

PHASE 2 – TO THE SOURCES!

(IS THE MILITANT ISLAMIST WORLDVIEW CONSISTENT)

This phase of the research is the most vital to determining an appropriate psychological operations strategy, whether that means continuing with our current approach, which will be discussed in a later chapter, or shifting tactics to a different approach. The goal is to demonstrate that militant Islamists such as IS either have a fundamentally flawed understanding of the ideology that they profess adherence to or that they are indeed in adherence to the fundamentals of their professed ideology. Whatever the result, it should drive any PSYOP strategy aimed at influencing the cognitive domain of the adversary with the ultimate goal of causing a change in his behavior favorable to U.S. national security objectives. As previously mentioned, a person or group can claim adherence to a certain source of inspiration, though it does not necessarily follow that the group is indeed consistent with, or in compliance with, the supposed source of inspiration. Its claim is verified or refuted by going to the source, in this case the Quran. The Quran is the absolute authority and single uniting factor in the complex study of Islam. From the most austere Salafist to the most spiritually minded Sufi, the Quran is the authority for the broad spectrum of beliefs and practices known today as Islam. For all Muslims, the Quran is the eternal word of Allah without admixture of man's insights or thoughts. Therefore its representations are viewed as perfectly accurate and its commands divinely justified. The Quran calls for all Muslims to follow Allah and his word alone:

[Say] “Shall I seek a judge other than Allah while it is He Who has sent down unto you the Book, explained in detail.” (Surah 6:114)⁷⁰

Follow, [O mankind], what has been revealed to you from your Lord and do not follow other than Him any allies. (Surah 7:3)

While the Quran claims to be intrinsically clear and understandable in and of itself,⁷¹ this research will also reference the *hadith* (sayings or actions attributed to Muhammad) and the *tafsir* (authoritative exegesis) in order to ensure a proper, or at least recognizably authoritative, understanding of Quranic text. Among the *ummah* (Muslim community), the most widely used *hadith* are known as *Al-Kutub Al-Sittah* (“The Six Books” or “The Authentic Six”).⁷² These six include: Sahih al-Bukhari, Sahih Muslim, Sunan an-Nasa’I, Sunan Abu Dawud, Jami’ at-Tirmidhi, and Suana Ibn Majah. The sayings and actions of Muhammad are considered of utmost importance because the Quranic teaching on how to be a Muslim is normatively exemplified in the life of Muhammad. Allah has stated in his word: “Ye have indeed in the Messenger of Allah a beautiful pattern of conduct.”⁷³ Out of the six *hadith*, Sahih al-Bukhari has the highest standing in the Islamic community followed by the

⁷⁰ In quoting from the Quran this researcher draws mostly from *The Noble Quran*, a contemporary translation that is officially sponsored by the Saudi government. It is reported to be the most widely disseminated Quran in most Islamic bookstores and Sunni mosques throughout the English-speaking world. I also use such well-known and accepted renderings in English as Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s translation, Mohammad Habib Shakir’s translation, and the translation known as Sahih International. The Noble Quran can be found at the following site: <http://www.noblequran.com/translation>. The other translations can be found here: <http://al-quran.info/#trans>

⁷¹ Quran. Surah 43:2-3

⁷² Joseph Butta. “The Dawn of Islamic Literalism: Rise of the Crescent Moon.” P. Bloomington: Author House 2013 p. ix

⁷³ Quran. Surah 33:21

hadith of his student, Muslim Ibn al-Hajjaj (Sahih Muslim).⁷⁴ Therefore the research will draw upon these two when appropriate.

The word *tafsir* is an Arabic word meaning interpretation or exegesis. It is derived from the word *fassara* which means to explain, to expound, or to disclose. In Islamic contexts, it is defined as understanding and uncovering the will of Allah as is conveyed by the Quranic text.⁷⁵ It has been written of *tafsir* that it “acts like the key that unlocks the treasure [of the Quran], so that mankind can benefit from it to the greatest possible extent.”⁷⁶ *Tafsir* is written by a *mufassir*, an authoritative expert who must literally master and be qualified in 15 fields before he can authoritatively interpret or explain the Quran.⁷⁷ These fields include classical Arabic, Arabic philology, Arabic morphology, the science of etymology, syntax, metaphors, the principles of Islamic jurisprudence, and several others. In order to provide an authoritative verdict concerning practices of Islam as prescribed by the Quran one must be “knowledgeable of the Book of Allah, and [be able to differentiate between] its *naasikh* (things abrogated by Allah) from its *mansookh* (new rulings) and its *muhkam* (clear verses) from its *mutashaabih* (allegorical verses) and its *makkee* (Meccan) from its *madanee* (Madinan) and its *asbaab an-nuzool* (circumstances of revelation).”⁷⁸ Suffice it to say, it is not permissible for your average layman like one’s neighbor, co-

⁷⁴ Ibn Al-Salah Shahrāzūrī. “An Introduction to the Science of Hadith.” 1st ed., Garnet Publishing, 2005, p. 1245

⁷⁵ Abu Ammaar Yasir Qadhi. “An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur’aan.” Birmingham: Al-Hidaayah Publishing and Distribution. 1999 p. 289

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 292

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 324

⁷⁸ Abu Ammaar Yasir Qadhi. “An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur’aan.” Birmingham: Al-Hidaayah Publishing and Distribution. 1999 p. 324

worker, or even professor to interpret the Quran in a manner inconsistent with the *mufasssireen* (plural of *mufasssir*).

The rigid science of *tafsir* is a process that is long-established, formal, and fixed; the qualifications required for deriving meaning for the Quran are not negotiable.⁷⁹ This research will focus on three notable *mufasssireen* and their respective *tafsir*. The readers should bear in mind that the *tafsir* presented are those for which the author of this paper was able to find an English translation. However, it is equally as important to consider that these particular *tafsir* were translated into English due to their popularity and recognized scholarship. *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim* was written by the highly influential Sunni scholar Ismail Ibn Kathir who was known for having memorized the entire Quran word-for-word. The *tafsir* of Ibn Kathir was written around 1370 AD and is one of the most respected and accepted explanations for the Quran and is the most widely used explanation in Arabic today.⁸⁰ He is also considered to be Islam's preeminent historian and scholar by Middle

Figure 1: Comments on Ibn Kathir's Scholarship

"[He is] Islam's preeminent historian and Islamic scholar" CDR Youssef Aboul-Enein, U.S. Army War College paper, Oct 2004

"Ibn Kathir wrote a famous commentary on the Quran. [It] is famous all over the Muslim world, and among Muslims in the Western world [it] is one of the most widely used explanations of the Quran today." http://www.quranwebsite.com/tafsir%20ibn%20kathir/tafsir_ibn_kathir.html

"*Tafsir* [of] Ibn Kathir is one of the earliest, easiest and most read commentary of the Quran." <http://www.islamwb.com/tafsir-ibn-kathir-pdf>

"Ibn Kathir was widely acclaimed for the sublime degree of learning that he so admirably attained. Scholars have unanimously attested to his well-versedness, particularly in the fields of the exegesis of the Glorious Quran, Hadith and history. [He is] the leader of all men engaged in the exegesis." <http://www.islambasics.com/view.php?bkID=80&chapter=3>

"This is why those we have quoted here have been accepted by leading scholars such as Ibn Kathir..." <http://islam101.net/index.php/theology/prophet-muhammad-s-a-a-w/357-the-light-of-the-prophet-by-dr-badawi?showall=1>

"Ibn Kathir, the renowned Islamic scholar and historian..." <http://www.islamreligion.com/articles/10633/luqman-s-advice-to-his-son-part-1/>

"The reader should compare [*tafsir*] to other reliable *tafsir* books, like the *Tafsir* of Ibn Kathir." <http://www.islamweb.net/emainpage/index.php?page=showfatwa&Option=Fatwald&Id=95342>

⁷⁹ Coyt Hargus. "Quranic Interpretation: True Messages vs Manipulations." *FAO Journal International Affairs* Volume XIV, Number 2 May 2011, p. 20

⁸⁰ "Quran Tafsir" Retrieved from <http://www.qtafsir.com/>

East Foreign Area Officer and former special advisor on Islamic militancy at the Office of the Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, Commander Youssef Aboul-Enein.⁸¹ The other two *tafsir* are the two most contemporary *tafsir*, written by recognized *mufasssireen*, for which this researcher was able to find translations in English. *Ma'ariful Quran* is another Sunni *tafsir* completed around 1976 by the Islamic Scholar Mufti Muhammad Shafi. Neither Ibn Kathir nor Muhammad Shafi was of the Hanbali school of jurisprudence, the school of thought typically associated with militant Islamists. Ibn Kathir was of the Shafi'i tradition and Muhammad Shafi was a Hanafi jurist.⁸² The Shia *Tafsir al-Mizan* (1981), which was written by the Islamic philosopher Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, is a 20 volume *tafsir*. Unfortunately, not all of the volumes have been translated into English. Despite the gap in time between the Ibn Kathir's *tafsir* and the other two contemporary *tafsir* and their theological differences (Sunni vs. Shia), the reader will notice significant unity in the general interpretation and explanation of these *mufasssireen*.

What follows are verses, in no particular order, often cited by militant Islamist groups to support their belief system outlined in Phase 1. Militant Islamists are often chided for misunderstanding or misapplying these same verses. Therefore each verse will be followed by excerpts from the *hadith* and/or *tafsir* mentioned above in order to avoid the charge of using isolated, out-of-context quotations in order to establish or refute a proposition. The words of Muhammad and explanation of the *mufasssireen* will provide the context. Again,

⁸¹ Youssef Aboul-Enein, "Islamic Rulings on Warfare" Strategic Studies Institute, Oct 2004, p. 7 Retrieved from <https://fas.org/man/eprint/islamic.pdf>

⁸² Nagma. "Impact of the Ahl-E-Hadith Movement on Contemporary Muslim Society in India." Department of Islamic Studies, Aligarh Muslim University. Aligarh, 2015 India Retrieved from <https://ia800103.us.archive.org/19/items/ImpactOfTheAhlAlHadithMovementOnContemporaryMuslimSocietyInIndia/Impact%20of%20the%20Ahl%20al-%20Hadith%20movement%20on%20Contemporary%20Muslim%20Society%20in%20India.pdf> p. 66

the reader should bear in mind that this section does not serve to determine whether or not groups like IS are right or wrong in their beliefs, but instead serves solely to determine whether or not these groups can find legitimate justification for their beliefs and behavior in the Islamic texts, which would subsequently give them a divine mandate to oppose contemporary manifestations of Islam and to conduct warfare against unbelievers and perceived heretics. This determination will be made by surveying the beliefs of those deemed qualified by the *ummah* to explain the proper understanding of the texts. Words or whole sentences will be underlined when they either directly confirm or refute a belief held by militant Islamists. Each section will conclude with an analysis of the text as it relates to the professed beliefs and concomitant behavior of militant Islamists.

Quran

Say to those who have disbelieved, if they cease (from disbelief) their past will be forgiven. But if they return (thereto), then the examples of those (punished) before them have already preceded (as a warning). And fight them until there is no more *fitnah* (disbelief and polytheism: i.e. worshipping others besides Allah) and the religion (worship) will all be for Allah alone [in the whole of the world]. But if they cease (worshipping others besides Allah), then certainly, Allah is All-Seer of what they do. (Surah 8:38-39)

Fight against those who (1) believe not in Allah, (2) nor in the Last Day, (3) nor forbid that which has been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger (4) and those who acknowledge not the religion of truth (i.e. Islam) among the people of the Scripture (Jews and Christians), until they pay the *jizyah* (religious tax) with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued. (Surah 9:29)

O you who believe! Fight those of the disbelievers who are close to you, and let them find harshness in you, and know that Allah is with those who are the *Al-Muttaqun* (the pious) (Surah 9:123)

Hadith (sayings/actions of Muhammad)

Allah's Apostle said, "I have been ordered to fight the people till they say: 'None has the right to be worshipped but Allah,' and whoever says, 'None has the right to be worshipped but Allah' his life and property will be saved from me."⁸³

I have been ordered (by Allah) to fight against the people until they testify that none has the right to be worshipped but Allah and that Muhammad is Allah's Apostle.⁸⁴

I have been commanded to fight against people so long as they do not declare that there is no god but Allah.⁸⁵

Exegesis (authoritative explanations)

Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim

Commenting on Surah 8:39

"There is a *Hadith* collected in the Two *Sahih*s that testifies to this explanation [of eliminating unbelief]. The Messenger of Allah said, 'I was commanded to fight against the people until they proclaim, 'There is no deity worthy of worship except Allah.' If and when they say it, they will preserve their blood and wealth from me.'"⁸⁶

Commenting on Surah 9:29

"Allah commands His believing servants, who are pure in religion and person, to expel the idolaters who are filthy in the religious sense. This honorable Ayah (verse) was revealed with the order to fight the People of the Book. After the pagans were defeated, the people entered Allah's religion in large numbers,

⁸³ Sahih Bukhari 2946 Book 52, Hadith 158 <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/56/158>; Sahih Bukhari 6924 Book 88, Hadith 7 <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/88/7>

⁸⁴ Sahih al-Bukhari 25 Book, 2, Hadith 18 <http://sunnah.com/bukhari/2/18>

⁸⁵ Sahih Muslim 21a, 21b, and 21c <http://sunnah.com/muslim/1>

⁸⁶ Ibn Kathir. Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim
http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1543&Itemid=63

and the Arabian Peninsula was secured under the Muslims' control. Allah commanded His Messenger to fight the People of the Scriptures, Jews and Christians, on the ninth year of Hijrah, and he prepared his army to fight the Romans and called the people to Jihad announcing his intent and destination. '[Fight] (until they pay the *Jizyah*)', if they do not choose to embrace Islam, (with willing submission), in defeat and subservience, (and feel themselves subdued.), disgraced, humiliated and belittled. The Prophet said, 'Do not initiate the Salam (peaceful greeting) to the Jews and Christians, and if you meet any of them in a road, force them to its narrowest alley.'”⁸⁷

Commenting on Surah 9:123

“Allah commands the believers to fight the disbelievers, the closest in area to the Islamic state, then the farthest. This is why the Messenger of Allah started fighting the idolaters in the Arabian Peninsula. When he finished with them and Allah gave him control over *Makkah* (Mecca) and other Arab provinces, and the various Arab tribes entered Islam in large crowds, he then started fighting the People of the Scriptures (Jews and Christians)...Let the disbelievers find harshness in you against them in battle. The complete believer is he who is kind to his believing brother, and harsh with his disbelieving enemy.”⁸⁸

Ma'ariful Quran

Commenting on Surah 8:38-39

“Two words: *Fitnah* and *Din*, used here need our attention since both are used in many shades of meaning lexically. At this place, two meanings have been reported from authorities of *Tafsir* from among the Sahabah and Tabi'in: (1) That *Fitnah* is taken to mean *Kufr* (disbelief) and *Shirk* (idolatry) and *Din* is taken to mean the *Din* (religion) of Islam. Given this exegetic view, the verse would mean that Muslims must continue fighting disbelievers until disbelief disintegrates yielding its place to Islam and there remains no religion and faith other

⁸⁷ Ibn Kathir. Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim
http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2568&Itemid=64

⁸⁸ Ibn Kathir. Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim
http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1578&Itemid=64

than Islam. Given this situation, this injunction will be specific to only the people of *Makkah* (Mecca) and the people of Arabia - because, the Arabian Peninsula is the home of Islam. The presence of any other religion, other than Islam in it, shall be dangerous for Islam. As for the rest of the world, other religions and faiths could be kept existing as confirmed by other verses of the Holy Qur'an and reports from Hadith.⁸⁹...In other parts of the world, the disbelievers may opt for *jizyah* and may continue to profess their own religion, the punishment of their disbelief being deferred to the Hereafter.”⁹⁰

Commenting on Surah 9:29

“As for the injunction of jihad against the People of the Book given in verse 29, it is really not particular to the People of the Book. The fact is that this very injunction applies to all disbelieving groups - because, the reasons for the injunction to fight mentioned next are common to all disbelievers. If so, the injunction has to be common too. But, the People of the Book were mentioned here particularly to serve a purpose. Since, it was possible that Muslims may hesitate to fight against them on the ground that they too are believers in a certain degree, believers in *Torah* and *Injil* (Gospel), and in Sayyidna *Musa* (Moses) and *'Isa* (Jesus) (may peace be upon them both). So, it was possible that their connection with past prophets and their Books may become a factor in dissuading them from jihad. Therefore, fighting with them was mentioned particularly.... Literally, *jizyah* means return or recompense. In the terminology of the *Shari'ah*, it refers to the amount of money taken from disbelievers in lieu of killing. The reason is that *kufr* (disbelief/unbelief) and *shirk* (sin of practicing idolatry or polytheism) are rebellion against Allah and *Rasul* (the Messenger/Apostle). Killing is the real punishment for it. But, Allah *Ta'ala* (Almighty) has, in His perfect mercy, reduced their punishment by giving them an option. [ie. pay the *jizyah*]”⁹¹

⁸⁹ Muhammad Shafi. Ma'ariful Quran, Vol 4, p. 216 <https://archive.org/download/maarifulquran-english-pdf/MaarifulquranEnglishPdf-Vol4-Page001-708ByMuftiShafiUsmaniRah.pdf>

⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 219 (footnote)

⁹¹ Shafi, Vol 4 p. 363 <https://archive.org/download/maarifulquran-english-pdf/MaarifulquranEnglishPdf-Vol4-Page001-708ByMuftiShafiUsmaniRah.pdf>

Commenting on Surah 9:123

“‘Being near’ could be taken in terms of the place, that is, the disbelievers who live closer to home base should be fought against first. And it could also be understood in terms of relationship, that is, those who are near in kinship, parentage and other social bonds should be given precedence. ‘And let them find severity in you’, the word ‘*ghilzah*’ means severity or toughness. The sense is that the disbelievers must be confronted in a manner that would not allow them to take their adversary to be weak.”⁹²

Analysis

While it may seem possible to derive alternative meanings from the Quranic verses above by requiring them to be viewed in a limited and specific historical context, the explanations of the *mufasssireen* preclude this approach. Both of the renowned *mufasssireen* explained these Quranic injunctions in the present tense suggesting that the commands are continuous, open-ended commands not limited to any historical context. Despite the centuries that had passed since the Quranic verses were first revealed, nowhere in their explanations did either of the *mufasssireen* allude to the inapplicability of the commands found in these verses during the time period each respective *tafsir* was written.

The argument exists in contemporary Islamic apologetics that “fight” refers solely to a spiritual struggle or is exclusively defensive in nature. This author does not reject the idea that these aspects are certainly within the framework of jihad. But to deny that there is also a very aggressive, physical, and brutal aspect would be to oppose the explanation of those qualified to provide proper context and meaning of the Quranic text. Any rival explanation that does not come from a qualified *mufasssireen* would simply be an opinion. Even if it were

⁹² Shafi, Vol. 4, p. 503 <https://archive.org/download/maarifulquran-english-pdf/MaarifulquranEnglishPdf-Vol4-Page001-708ByMuftiShafiUsmaniRah.pdf>

a scholarly opinion, it would not be authoritative exegesis. This thesis does not seek to prove that militant Islamists are exclusively right in their interpretation. The argument of this thesis depends on whether or not a militant Islamist understanding of the Quran, by which they justify attacks on non-belligerents, is just as valid and supported by the text as any moderate understanding of Islam.

The militant Islamist claim that disbelief is itself a reason to fight and kill appears to be consistent with Islamic teachings as evidenced by the Quran and further supported by the authentic *hadith* and respected *tafsir*. It is irrelevant if other interpretations exist; the militant interpretation finds legitimate support. If Muhammad is the model of conduct to be followed, his words alone as quoted from the *hadith* serve as justification for groups like IS to fight against, or at least demand *jizyah* from, anyone who does not testify that Allah alone has the right to be worshipped. The reason given for fighting in the above-cited passages is not based on defense or in response to persecution; it is based on disbelief in Allah and rejection of his supposed words. As a researcher, it would be analytically dishonest to conclude, at least in this regard, that IS and like-minded groups completely bastardize their religious texts in order to arrive at an interpretation that justifies their violent behavior. As it concerns fighting against disbelievers simply because of their disbelief, the plain reading of the Quranic text appears to support this interpretation. The writings of Ibn Kathir and Muhammad Shafi, two Islamic scholars recognized as being qualified to provide an authoritative explanation of the text, further legitimize a violent understanding of the text. Their exegesis of the Quranic text combined with their recognized standing of *mufasssireen* within the *ummah* should deflect any criticism of an emotional or intellectual predisposition to a particular judgement in this analysis. If such criticism still exists, it would serve to only

reveal the emotional or intellectual bias of the critic or perhaps simply a strong commitment to presuppositions that conflict with the militant Islamist worldview.

Quran

1. Freedom from (all) obligations (is declared) from Allah and His Messenger to those of the *Mushrikun*⁹³ (polytheists, pagans, idolaters, disbelievers in the Oneness of Allah), with whom you made a treaty. 2. So travel freely (O *Mushrikun*) for four months (as you will) throughout the land, but know that you cannot escape (from the Punishment of) Allah, and Allah will disgrace the disbelievers. 3. And a declaration from Allah and His Messenger to mankind on the greatest day (the 10th of *Dhul-Hijjah* - the 12th month of Islamic calendar) that Allah is free from (all) obligations to the *Mushrikun* and so is His Messenger. So if you (*Mushrikun*) repent, it is better for you, but if you turn away, then know that you cannot escape (from the Punishment of) Allah. And give tidings (O Muhammad) of a painful torment to those who disbelieve. 4. Except those of the *Mushrikun* with whom you have a treaty, and who have not subsequently failed you in aught, nor have supported anyone against you. So fulfill their treaty to them to the end of their term. Surely Allah loves *Al-Muttaqun* (the pious). 5. Then when the Sacred Months have passed, kill the *Mushrikun* wherever you find them, and capture them and besiege them, and prepare for them each and every ambush. But if they repent and perform *As-Salat* (prayers), and give *Zakat* (tithe), then leave their way free. Verily, Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. 6. And if anyone of the *Mushrikun* seeks your protection then grant him protection, (so that he may hear the Word of Allah), and then escort him to where he can be secure, that is because they are men who know not. 7. How can there be a covenant with Allah and with His Messenger for the *Mushrikun* except those with whom you made a covenant near *Al-Masjid-al-Haram* (at Mecca)? So long, as they are true to you, stand you true to them. Verily, Allah loves *Al-Muttaqun* (the pious). (Surah 9:1-7)

Hadith (sayings/actions of Muhammad)

Allah's Apostle said, "The Hour (the end of days) will not be established until you fight with the Jews, and the stone behind

⁹³ As a reminder, *mushrikun* are those who commit *shirk*, which is the deification or worship of anyone or anything besides Allah. Practitioners of all other religions besides Islam are considered *mushrikun*.

which a Jew will be hiding will say. ‘O Muslim! There is a Jew hiding behind me, so kill him.’⁹⁴

Abu Huraira reported Allah’s Messenger as saying: “The last hour would not come unless the Muslims will fight against the Jews and the Muslims would kill them until the Jews would hide themselves behind a stone or a tree and a stone or a tree would say: ‘Muslim, or the servant of Allah, there is a Jew behind me; come and kill him’”⁹⁵

It has been narrated by Umar b. al-Khattib that he heard the Messenger of Allah say: “I will expel the Jews and Christians from the Arabian Peninsula and will not leave any but Muslim.”⁹⁶

Exegesis (authoritative explanations)

Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim

Commenting on the entire chapter (Surah 9)

This honorable Surah was one of the last Surahs⁹⁷ to be revealed to the Messenger of Allah.⁹⁸

Commenting on verses 4 and 5

This is an exception regulating the longest extent of time for those who have a general treaty - without time mentioned - to four months. They (*mushrikun* – followers of other religions) would have four months to travel the lands in search of

⁹⁴ Sahih Bukhari 2926, Book 56, Hadith 139 <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/56/139>

⁹⁵ Sahih Muslim 2922, Book 54 Hadith 105 <https://sunnah.com/muslim/54/105>

⁹⁶ Sahih Muslim 1767 a, Book 32 Hadith 75 <https://sunnah.com/muslim/32/75>

⁹⁷ According to the Quran, when Muslims are faced with conflicting commands they are not supposed to simply choose the one they like best or follow the one that better reflects cultural norms of modern society. Rather, they are to go to history (with the help of the *Hadith*) and see which verse was revealed last (the Quran is not organized chronologically). Whichever verse came later is said to abrogate (or cancel) the earlier conflicting revelation. This doctrine is supported by Surah 2:106 and Surah 16:101 as well as the explanations of a multitude of *mufasssireen*. Surah 9 is chronologically the second to last surah in the Quran and the last surah that contains commands from Allah. It represents Allah’s final marching orders to his followers.

⁹⁸ Ibn Kathir. Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim
http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2582&Itemid=64

sanctuary for themselves wherever they wish. Those whose treaty mentioned a specific limited term, then the longest it would extend was to the point of its agreed upon termination date. “Upon the end of the four months during which We prohibited you from fighting the idolaters, and which is the grace period We gave them,” then fight and kill the idolaters wherever you may find them. “Then fight the Mushrikin (idolaters) wherever you find them,” means, on the earth in general, except for the Sacred Area [Mecca]. Do not wait until you find them. Rather, seek and besiege them in their areas and forts, gather intelligence about them in the various roads and fairways so that what is made wide looks ever smaller to them. This way, they will have no choice, but to die or embrace Islam. These Ayat (verses) allowed fighting people unless, and until, they embrace Islam and implement its rulings and obligations. This honorable Ayah (verse 9:5) was called the Ayah of the Sword, about which Ad-Dahhak bin Muzahim said, “It abrogated every agreement of peace between the Prophet and any idolater, every treaty, and every term.” Al-`Awfi said that Ibn `Abbas commented: “No idolater had any more treaty or promise of safety ever since Surah Bara'ah [this Surah] was revealed.”⁹⁹

Commenting on verse 6

“And if anyone of the *Mushrikin*, whom you were commanded to fight and We allowed you their blood and property, seeks your protection, asked you for safe passage, then accept his request until he hears the Words of Allah, the Qur'an.” Recite the Qur'an to him and mention a good part of the religion with which you establish Allah's proof against him (and then escort him to where he can be secure) and safe, until he goes back to his land, his home, and area of safety... When Musaylimah the Liar sent an emissary (Ibn An-Nawwahah) to the Messenger of Allah, he asked him, “Do you testify that Musaylimah is a messenger from Allah” He said, “Yes.” The Messenger of Allah said, “I would have cut off your head, if it was not that emissaries are not killed.” When it became known that he (Ibn

⁹⁹ Ibn Kathir. Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim

http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2582&Itemid=64

http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2581&Itemid=64

An-Nawwahah) still testified that Musaylimah was a messenger from Allah, Ibn Mas`ud summoned him and said to him, “You are not delivering a message now!” He commanded that Ibn An-Nawwahah be decapitated.”¹⁰⁰

Commenting on verse 7

Allah mentions the wisdom in dissolving all obligations to the idolaters and giving them a four month period of safety, after which they will meet the sharp sword wherever they are found. How can there be a covenant for the *Mushrikin* (idolaters), a safe resort and refuge, while they persist in *Shirk* with Allah, and disbelief in Him and His Messenger?”¹⁰¹

Ma'ariful Quran

Commenting on the entire chapter (Surah)

This Surah proclaims freedom from any responsibility for the disbelievers and announces the withdrawal of peace and protection from those people - which is not fit for *Bismillah* (In the name of God)...The truth is that a war waged for Allah to implement His injunctions shall be what Jihad is.”¹⁰²

Commenting of verses 3 - 4

Forcing weak people to leave a place without reasonable notice of evacuation, or attacking them without warning is cowardly, and very ignoble indeed. Whenever such an action has to be taken, it is necessary to make a public announcement first so that the affected people, who do not accept the law of the land, may get the time to go wherever they wished, freely and conveniently. In case there is the need to annul a treaty of peace already made - which is permitted subject to some

¹⁰⁰ Ibn Kathir. Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim
http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2580&Itemid=64

¹⁰¹ Ibn Kathir. Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim
http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2579&Itemid=64

¹⁰² Shafi. Vol 4 p 303 & 310 <https://archive.org/download/maarifulquran-english-pdf/MaarifulquranEnglishPdf-Vol4-Page001-708ByMuftiShafiUsmaniRah.pdf>

conditions - it is far better to allow the treaty to remain valid until it expires automatically.¹⁰³

Commenting of verse 5

The fifth ruling from the cited verses tells us about the standard Muslim attitude towards the enemies of Islam. When confronted with enemies, Muslims should always keep in mind that they are no enemy to them personally. The truth of the matter is that they are opposed to their disbelief, which is actually the cause of their own loss in the present world as well as in the Hereafter. As for the opposition of Muslims to them, that too is really based on good wishes for them. Therefore, Muslims should never abandon the opportunity to give good counsel to them, whether in war or peace. This theme appears in these verses repeatedly. It promises real prosperity for them in this world and in the world to come, only if they were to rescind their thinking. The text does not leave it at that. It also warns them of the consequences: if they refused to repent and correct, they would not only be destroyed and killed in the present world but, they would also not escape their punishment even after death. It is interesting that, along with the proclamation of withdrawal (of peace) in these verses, the strain of sympathetic insistence also continues.”¹⁰⁴

Commenting on verse 6

It is obligatory on Muslims that they should allow and protect anyone who comes to them to learn more about Islam... This injunction, according to *Tafsir al-Qurtubi*, is operative only in a situation when the purpose of the visitor is to listen to the Word of Allah and know more about Islam....In case, the objective of the visitor is business, or some other pursuit, it would depend on the discretion of relevant Muslim officials who would decide in terms of what is best in Muslim interests.

¹⁰³ Shafi. Vol 4 p. 311 <https://archive.org/download/maarifulquran-english-pdf/MaarifulquranEnglishPdf-Vol4-Page001-708ByMuftiShafiUsmaniRah.pdf>

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 311

Should they deem it fit, they may permit and should they think otherwise, they can act at their discretion.”¹⁰⁵

Analysis

According to the Quran, when Muslims are faced with conflicting commands they are not supposed to simply choose the one they like best or follow the one that better reflects cultural norms of modern society. Rather, they are to go to history (using the *Hadith*) and see which verse was revealed later since the Quran is not organized chronologically. Whichever verse came later is said to abrogate (or cancel) the earlier conflicting revelation. This doctrine is supported by Surah 2:106 and Surah 16:101 as well as the explanations of the *mufasssireen*. In 622 CE, when Muhammad and his followers migrated from Mecca to what is now known as Medina, he transformed from a mere prophet and spiritual guide to a recognized political and military leader. Soon after began the systematic revelation of Quranic passages which contained commands to launch offensive attacks against unbelievers including Jews, Christians, and pagans. Surah 9 is chronologically the second to last surah in the Quran and, as Ibn Kathir explained in his commentary, it is indeed the last surah that contains commands from Allah. Therefore, it represents Allah’s final marching orders to his followers. The aggressively violent, warlike passages in the Quran are almost exclusively found in the Medinan passages and subsequently abrogate the earlier Meccan passages which promote tolerance and acceptance.

A survey of the militant Islamist literature revealed opposition to any system outside of Islam whether political, social, or economic. The opposition is strongest against non-Islamic religious systems such as Catholicism, Protestantism, Orthodoxy, Mormonism,

¹⁰⁵ Shafi. Vol 4 p. 315 <https://archive.org/download/maarifulquran-english-pdf/MaarifulquranEnglishPdf-Vol4-Page001-708ByMuftiShafiUsmaniRah.pdf>

Buddhism, and Hinduism, all of which militant Islamists view as *shirk*. According to *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, which praises itself for being an “authoritative resource [that] brings together the best current scholarship in the field for students, scholars, government officials, community groups, and librarians to foster a more accurate and informed understanding of the Islamic world,”¹⁰⁶ *shirk* is defined as a “theological term referring to the association of someone or something with God, that is, putting someone or something in the place of God, thus deviating from monotheism.”¹⁰⁷ At the very least, militant Islamists appear to have a proper understanding of the word *shirk*. Because the Quranic teaching of Christians is that they are actually polytheists who worship Allah, Jesus and even Mary as three separate and distinct gods, they are guilty of *shirk*.¹⁰⁸ Despite the fact that Christians are actually monotheists and believe in one Triune God (the Trinity), which in no way includes Mary, they are nonetheless viewed as *mushrikun*. The prophet of the Mormons, Joseph Smith, taught that there is a plurality of gods and that Mormons themselves could become gods.¹⁰⁹ Therefore Mormonism is considered *shirk*. Buddha is considered an idol and there are well over a million deities in Hinduism, justifying the application of *shirk* to both of those religious ideologies as well.

The criticism aimed at militant Islamists does not center on their application of the word *shirk* to various world religions, but instead on what they believe should be done with

¹⁰⁶ “About Oxford Islamic Studies Online.” In *The Oxford Diction of Islam*, edited by John L. Esposito. Oxford Islamic Studies Online, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/Public/about.html>

¹⁰⁷ “Shirk.” In *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* edited by John L. Esposito. Oxford Islamic Studies Online, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2195> (accessed 22-Jul-2018)

¹⁰⁸ Surah 5:73 and Surah 5:116

¹⁰⁹ Joseph Smith, Jr. “The King Follett Sermon.” <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1971/04/the-king-follett-sermon?lang=eng>

mushrikun. Militant Islamists like IS believe that “committing *shirk* with Allah is a sin that makes one permissible to be killed.”¹¹⁰ Unless a *mushrik* pays the *jizyah* (religious tax) and thereby enters into *dhimmah* (protection), their necks should be struck “until slaughter has been inflicted upon them.”¹¹¹ Once again, the plain reading of Surah 9:5 appears to command Muslims to “kill the *Mushrikun* wherever you find them.” If a *mushrik* repents, which seems to imply forsaking his idolatry and accepting Islam, he is to be set free. Acknowledging a lack of formal Quranic education and the potential for biases, this researcher must turn to those qualified to explain the meaning of the Quran. “Qualified” is not simply a characteristic attributed to one’s devote Muslim co-worker nor does it mean a professor with a PhD in Islamic Studies. It does not even mean the imam of the local mosque, unless of course he is qualified as a *mufasssir*. All of these individuals are free to explain what they believe certain Quranic passages mean. However, if their explanation conflicts with the explanation of an established *mufasssir*, it is they that are in error and not the *mufasssir*. When one reads Ibn Kathir’s explanation that *mushrikun* should be fought on earth in general until they die or embrace Islam, it is difficult to conclude that the Quranic verse in question has some esoteric meaning other than the one provided by the plain reading of the text. What message should a Muslim take away from Mufti Muhammad Shafi’s explanation that a person is an enemy of Islam simply because of his or her disbelief and subsequently as an enemy they should be destroyed and killed? How should a Muslim respond to this seemingly harsh Quranic teaching when he reads that his own prophet, whom he is supposed to emulate, said that Allah has ordered him to fight people until they all

¹¹⁰ Islamic State. “The Ruling of the Belligerent Christians.” Rumiya V 9 4 May 2017 p. 5

¹¹¹ Islamic State. “From Hypocrisy to Apostasy: The Extinction of the Grayzone.” Dabiq V 7 12 February 2015 p. 21

worship Allah and that the end of days would not come unless Muslims fight against Jews and kill them?

As it concerns *shirk* and the militant Islamists' attitude toward *mushrikun*, the Quran, once again supported by the explanations of renowned *mufasssireen* and the teachings of Muhammad himself, appears to lend legitimate credence to the militants' interpretation and application of these particular *surahs*.

Quran

Let not the believers take the disbelievers as *Auliya* (supporters, helpers, etc.) instead of the believers, and whoever does that will never be helped by Allah in any way, except if you indeed fear a danger from them. And Allah warns you against Himself (His Punishment), and to Allah is the final return. (Surah 3:28)

O you who believe! Do not take the Jews and the Christians for friends; they are friends of each other; and whoever amongst you takes them for a friend, then surely he is one of them; surely Allah does not guide the unjust people. (Surah 5:51)

Those who reject Truth, among the People of the Book (Jews and Christians) and among the polytheists, will be in Hell-Fire, to dwell therein for aye. They are the worst of creatures. (Surah 98:6)

Exegesis (authoritative explanations)

Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim

Commenting on Surah 3:28

Allah prohibited His believing servants from becoming supporters of the disbelievers, or to take them as comrades with whom they develop friendships, rather than the believers. Whoever commits this act that Allah has prohibited, then Allah will discard him. Except those believers who in some areas or times fear for their safety from the disbelievers. In this case, such believers are allowed to show friendship to the disbelievers outwardly, but never inwardly. For instance, Al-Bukhari recorded that Abu Ad-Darda' said, 'We smile in the

face of some people although our hearts curse them.” Al-Bukhari said that Al-Hasan said, “The *Tuqyah*¹¹² is allowed until the Day of Resurrection.”¹¹³

Commenting on Surah 5:51

Allah forbids His believing servants from having Jews and Christians as friends, because they are the enemies of Islam and its people, may Allah curse them. Allah then states that they are friends of each other and He gives a warning threat to those who do this.¹¹⁴

Commenting on Surah 98:6

Allah informs of what will happen to the wicked disbelievers among the People of the Scripture and the idolaters who oppose Allah's divinely revealed Books and the Prophets whom He sent [...] they are the worst creation that Allah has fashioned and created.¹¹⁵

Ma'ariful Quran

Commenting of Surah 3:28

In these verses, Muslims have been instructed not to take disbelievers as their friends. Those who act against this instruction have been sternly warned: Those who take them as friends will find that their bond of love and friendship with Allah has been cut off. Any emotionally involved friendship that comes from the heart is absolutely forbidden (Haram). However, a formal friendship at the level of mutual dealings is, no doubt, permissible; but, that too is not favored if unnecessary...To sum up, as for the four degrees of relations with non-Muslims, we know that friendship which binds a

¹¹² The word *tuqyah* (often written as *taqiyya*) means “concealment” or “deception.” The idea is that Muslims are not allowed to be friends with non-Muslims unless they feel threatened by a stronger adversary in which case they are allowed to feign friendship.

¹¹³ Ibn Kathir. Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim
http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=550&Itemid=46

¹¹⁴ Ibn Kathir. Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim
http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=767&Itemid=60

¹¹⁵ Ibn Kathir. Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim
http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1099&Itemid=154

Muslim in very close ties with non-Muslims is not permissible under any condition. Relations based on benevolence, humane interest and concern are permitted with all but the belligerent ones. Similarly, politeness and friendly treatment is also permissible when the purpose is to entertain a guest, convey Islamic teachings to non-Muslims or to stay safe against being hurt or harmed by them.¹¹⁶

Commenting on Surah 5:51

Muslims have been commanded not to enter into *Muwalat* (deep friendship) with Jews and Christians as is customary practice of non-Muslims in general and, of Jews and Christians in particular, who reserve deep friendship for their own people only...After this clear instruction, should a Muslim do otherwise and enter into an intimate friendship with a Jew or Christian, then, in the sight of Islam, he is fit to be counted as one of them – and not as a Muslim.

Shafi does not comment on Surah 98:6

Tafsir al-Mizan (Shi'a tafsir)

Commenting on Surah 3:28

If the word “unbelievers”, coming at the beginning of these verses, covers the People of the Book too, then these verses forbid the believers to befriend, and fraternize with, the polytheists and the People of the Book all together; if it refers to the polytheists only, then the verses admonish the believers not to be friendly with them; instead they should join the party of Allah, loving Him and His Apostle....In this verse, taking the unbelievers for friends means establishing a psychological rapport with them. Such a friendship would taint the believer's vision, and would adversely affect his thoughts and character, encouraging him to follow his unbeliever friends in his life and manners. The clause, ‘rather than the believers’, points to this fact. It refers to a stage when the believer prefers the unbelievers rather than the believers as the object of his love and as the model for his life; the more he moves nearer to his

¹¹⁶ Shafi. Vol 2, p. 55-58

https://ia800401.us.archive.org/13/items/EnglishMaarifulQuranMuftiShafiUsmanir.aVol2_201307/English%20-MaarifulQuran-Mufti%20Shafi%20Usmani%20%28r.a%29%20-Vol-2.pdf

unbeliever friends, the more he distances himself from the believers...Belief and disbelief are diametrically opposed to each other; they can never reconcile. Their thoughts and deeds, their spiritual journey towards Allah, and in short their whole being would be totally different from the opposite party. Such a position is not in harmony with that of friendship; because friendship demands unity and rapport....That is why Allah warned them in the next sentence, “and whoever does this, he shall have nothing (to do) with Allah.” Then comes the exception of *taqiyyah*, because *taqiyyah* is only a show of love, not its reality...The Qur'an and the *sunnah* both agree that *taqiyyah* is permissible in places. Also, reason supports it. The main purpose of the religion and the Apostle is to keep the truth alive; and sometimes this purpose can be achieved by practicing *taqiyyah*, by keeping good relations with the enemies of the religion, while discarding *taqiyyah* would serve no purpose at all. It is a reality which no reasonable man can deny.”¹¹⁷

Commenting on Surah 5:51

In a nutshell, Allah warns the believers against taking the Jews and the Christians for friends, and threatens them most severely; then points in an apocalyptic way where such friendship was to take them and how it would turn into ruins the magnificent structure of religious character; then Allah will bring on scene a people who will manage the affairs and restore the religion's structure to its original splendor.¹¹⁸ Allah, the Sublime, in His words: "do not take the Jews and the Christians for friends", has not put any condition or speciality on friendship; it is unrestricted [and as such should be prohibiting any kind of nearness].¹¹⁹ Thus, the clause: “do not take the Jews and the Christians for *awliyā'*,” clearly forbids

¹¹⁷ Muhammad Tabataba'i. "Tafsir al-Mizan." The World Organization for Islamic Services. Vol 5 p. 219-220
<http://www.wofis.com/DownloadFilePage.aspx?fileName=asset/Books/AL-MIZAN.5.pdf>

¹¹⁸ Ibid., Vol 10 p. 218
<http://www.wofis.com/DownloadFilePage.aspx?fileName=asset/Books/Almizan-Final-10.pdf>

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p. 219

loving them or having any affection towards them; because such feelings pull the souls and spirits towards each other and it creates mutual moral effects on both sides; and if Muslims are influenced by un-Islamic behavior, their society will diverge from its religious way (which is based on the felicity of following the truth) to the way of unbelief (which is based on following the low desires and worshipping the Satan); and thus it will go astray from the path of the natural life.¹²⁰

Tabatabai's exegesis on Surah 98:6 has not been translated into English

Analysis

The conclusion drawn by militant Islamists from Surah 3:28 and Surah 5:51 in regards to close association with unbelievers, specifically with Jews and Christians, appears to be well reflected in the explanations of the *mufasssireen*. IS has proclaimed that merely "sitting silently with the [disbelievers] during a gathering of [disbelief] is [disbelief]." ¹²¹ It seems reasonable to conclude that when someone in pursuit of puritanical Islamic thinking reads how the renowned *mufasssir* Ibn Kathir explained the above-cited verses, he would come away with an unfriendly, if not downright hostile, disposition towards Jews and Christians as well as towards professing Muslims that have befriended Jews or Christians. From the perspective of this researcher, based on the supporting authoritative text it would be unfair to label militant Islamist interpretations of these Quranic verses as a radical departure from the true intent of the text. Doing so would be to also label Islam's preeminent scholar and historian as grossly mistaken in his understanding of Allah's revelation. That would be a difficult argument to win considering the respect his writings have within the *ummah*. While

¹²⁰ Tabataba'i, Vol 10 p. 224

<http://www.wofis.com/DownloadFilePage.aspx?fileName=asset/Books/Almizan-Final-10.pdf>

¹²¹ Islamic State. "From Hypocrisy to Apostasy: The Extinction of the Grayzone." Dabiq V 7 12 February 2015 p. 60

the commentaries in his *tafsir* may seem extreme to non-believers, Ibn Kathir's writings are recommended to 7th grade American Muslim students as "one of the four most important treatments of the Quran and life of Muhammad."¹²² While Shafi's and Tabataba'i's explanations certainly have a softer tone, they nonetheless conclude that any amicable relationship with Jews or Christians for other than pragmatic purposes is strictly forbidden.

The reader should notice how the *mufasssireen* in their explanations above pass judgment on professing Muslims that enter into close friendship or alliance with non-Muslims. Such a person, per their explanation, is himself no longer a Muslim. He is discarded by Allah and is counted as an unbeliever with all its "perks." This is known as *takfir* – the "pronouncement that someone is an unbeliever (*kafir*) and no longer Muslim."¹²³ IS has been accused of misapplying *takfir* in their pronouncement of professing Muslims as unbelievers and subsequently executing them due to their alliance with or tacit support of the United States and other western powers. Those accusing IS of misapplication of this concept, when Allah says "whoever amongst you takes [an unbeliever] for a friend, then surely he is one of them," need to demonstrate how it means something different from its apparent meaning and from how the *mufasssireen* explain it and the militants apply it.

The lack of divergence in the interpretation and explanation of these *mufasssireen*, despite their varying backgrounds, is strongly connected to the idea of *bid'ah*, which linguistically means "innovation" or "novelty" but in religious matters it refers to heretical

¹²² Coughlin, p. 63 referring to Yahiya Emerick's *What Islam is all About: A Student Textbook (Grades 7 to 12)*, 5th rev. ed. (Lebanon: Noorart, 2004). p. 15; Coughlin p. 69 "*What Islam is All About* remains a bestselling English language Islamic school text for junior high level students in the United States since its initial publication in 1997 [...] The author, Yahiya Emerick, is an American-born convert to Islam based out of Long Island, New York, who is widely regarded as a "leading Islamic children's educationalist in the U.S."

¹²³ "Takfir." In *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* edited by John L. Esposito. Oxford Islamic Studies Online, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2319> (accessed 13-Sep-2018)

doctrine (heresy). In Islam, *bid'ah* refers to some earthly injection of meaning or doctrine to supersede that which Allah intended. Within Islam, heretics are considered cursed and ultimately destined for rejection on the Day of Resurrection. We read the following words of Muhammad as recorded in the two most famous and authentic *hadith*:

“So whoever innovates in it [Islam] a heresy (*bid'ah*) or commits a crime in it or gives shelter to such an innovator, will incur the curse of Allah, the angels and all the people, and none of his compulsory or optional good deeds will be accepted on the Day of Resurrection.”¹²⁴

“He who innovates or gives protection to an innovator, there is a curse of Allah and that of His angels and that of the whole humanity upon him.”¹²⁵

In light of the Islamic view of *bid'ah*, any attempts to reexamine the Islamic texts or to counter the established authoritative explanations of the *mufasssireen* are inhibited because such explanations would be viewed not only as non-authoritative but heretical.

The author of this thesis grants that all parties cited above could be mistaken in their understanding of the Quran. Logically everyone cannot be right, but everyone could be wrong. The militant Islamists could be mistaken in their understanding and application of seemingly violent Quranic texts despite the qualified scholarship supporting their interpretation. Perhaps our Muslim coworkers, colleagues, neighbors, and friends indeed have a better understanding of the true meaning of the text. Whatever the case, it is irrelevant. In constructing a PSYOP campaign to influence the thoughts and behaviors of our militant Islamist adversary, it would not matter what Allah really meant in his abstruse yet

¹²⁴ Sahih al-Bukhari 6755, Book 85, Hadith 32 <http://sunnah.com/bukhari/85/32>

¹²⁵ Sahih Muslim 1370d, Book 20, Hadith 24 <http://sunnah.com/muslim/20/24>

otherwise crystal-clear instructions to his followers. The reason for this irrelevance will be explained in Chapter IX.

CHAPTER VII

A RESPONSE TO POSSIBLE CRITICISM

Those who are most vocal in their accusations against the Islamic State and like-minded groups also use the Quran to support their position, supposedly proving their version of Islam to be correct as opposed to the Islam practiced by militant Islamists. This chapter will present the common arguments this researcher has found against the militant Islamists' "non-Islamic" beliefs and behavior. Once again the *mufasssireen* will be relied upon to provide clarification and insight into the proper, or at the very least a legitimate, understanding of the text and will serve to either validate or refute the criticism provided against the militant Islamist position.

Some contemporary Islamic scholars criticize militant Islamist groups for their violent tactics. Often times these scholars cite Surah 2:256 as a repudiation of militant behavior. One such scholar is CDR Youssef Aboul-Enein, a Middle East Foreign Affairs Officer in the Navy and current Chair of Islamic Studies at the National Defense University. Aboul-Enein claims that the militant Islamist worldview "breaks down in the face of verses that declare there shall be no compulsion in religion" citing specifically Surah 2:256.¹²⁶ The verse reads as follows:

There is no compulsion in religion. Verily, the Right Path has become distinct from the wrong path.

¹²⁶ Youssef Aboul-Enein. *Militant Islamist Ideology: Understanding the Global Threat*. Naval Institute Press, 2011 p. 73

Aboul-Enein's claim is that the imposition of Islam by force goes against the Quranic injunction of not coercing people to accept a certain religion, in this case Islam, as stated in Surah 2:256. Therefore, the argument goes, groups like IS are going against true Quranic Islam when they kill people for their unbelief or perceived apostasy. The more than one hundred Muslim scholars that have signed the *Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi* also cite this verse to denounce the actions of the Islamic State. In the letter, the scholars claim that the Islamic State has gone against the Quran by coercing "people to convert to Islam just as [it has] coerced Muslims to accept [its] views."¹²⁷ This researcher agrees with Aboul-Enein's and the other scholars' interpretation of the verse but not with their claim. The Islamic State does not provide its captives or the residents of conquered territory with the sole option of converting to Islam or be killed. The group provides for *kafirin* (unbelievers) to enter into *aman*, the condition of dhimmah (protection) granted to those who pay the *jizyah* (religious tax).¹²⁸ There is a distinct difference between 1) imposing Islam by force in the sense of imposing *Shari'a* law, enforcing the *jizyah*, and killing those who do not comply and 2) forcing someone to actually convert to Islam in the sense of worshipping Allah and following the spiritual guidance of Muhammad. It would seem that militant Islamists understand Surah 2:256 as forbidding the latter while providing provisions for the former. Ibn Kathir expounded on this verse in his tafsir with the following:

Do not force anyone to become Muslim, for Islam is plain and clear, and its proofs and evidence are plain and clear.

¹²⁷ Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi, p. 19 retrieved from <http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com/pdf/Booklet-English.pdf>

¹²⁸ Islamic State. "From Hypocrisy to Apostasy: The Extinction of the Grayzone." Dabiq V 7 12 February 2015 pg 24; Islamic State. "The Ruling of the Belligerent Christians." Rumiyah V 9 4 May 2017 , p. 5

Therefore, there is no need to force anyone to embrace Islam.¹²⁹

The preeminent Islamic scholar and historian, which by the way is exactly what Aboul-Enein considers Ibn Kathir to be,¹³⁰ explained that this verse is to be understood as meaning there is no need to force anyone to believe in Allah and convert to Islam. His thoughts on how to behave towards apostates and unbelievers were already made clear in the previous chapter. Muhammad Shafi in his *tafsir* addressed the seemingly conflicting natures of Quranic verses that command Muslims to fight on one hand and verses like Surah 2:256 which state that there is no compulsion in religion:

Keeping this verse in view, some people raise objections. They say this verse tells us that there is no compulsion in faith, although the teaching of *jihad* and *qital* (fighting) in Islam appears contrary to this principle. Looking at this a little carefully, we can find out that the objection is not valid, since the teaching of *jihad* and *qital* in Islam is not to coerce people into accepting Faith. Had it been so, why would there be Islamic injunctions of *jizyah* to provide an umbrella of security for *kuffar* (disbelievers) which protects their life, property and honour? In fact, this is to remove disorder, strife or *fasad* [mischief, disorder], for Allah Almighty dislikes *fasad*, which is what the *kuffar* are after. Therefore, Allah Almighty says: And they go about the earth spreading disorder and Allah does not like those who spread disorder (Surah 5:54). It is for this reason that Allah Almighty has ordained that the *fasad* created by these people should be removed by *jihad* and *qital*. So, killing such people [disbelievers and others causing disorder] is like the killing of serpents, scorpions and their harmful likes.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Ibn Kathir, Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim
http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=138

¹³⁰ Youssef Aboul-Enein, "Islamic Rulings on Warfare" Strategic Studies Institute, Oct 2004, p. 7 Retrieved from <https://fas.org/man/eprint/islamic.pdf>

¹³¹ Shafi, Vol 11, p. 638 <https://ia802707.us.archive.org/2/items/maarifulquran-english-pdf/MaarifulquranEnglishPdf-Vol1-Page638-688ByMuftiShafiUsmaniRah.pdf>

It would be erroneous to think that the Islamic State forces people to convert to Islam without providing the option of *aman*. As presented in their own literature, unbelievers can convert or pay the religious tax. If the unbelievers refuse to do either then the militant Islamists of the Islamic State are themselves compelled to fight against unbelief in order to “remove disorder, strife or fasad” exactly as Shafi explained in his *tafsir*. While these same militants are called to be merciful in cases of genuine repentance, this researcher acknowledges that these calls for mercy are not often granted. However, it is entirely likely that in the militant line of thinking, when propagated by fighting and fear, there can be no genuine repentance and acceptance of any Islamic idea. Therefore, conversion under such circumstances would be seen by the militants as disingenuous making mercy inapplicable or at least left up to the discretion of the militants.

Aboul-Enein submits another accusation against militant Islamist organizations in regards to suicide bombings. The claim is that Surah 2:195 refutes the idea of suicide attacks of any kind and therefore Islam rejects suicide bombings as a legitimate tactic, ergo the Islamic State is un-Islamic.¹³² The verse reads as follows:

And spend of your substance in the cause of Allah, and make not your own hands contribute to [your] destruction; but do good; for Allah loveth those who do good.

The argument is that the statement “make not your own hands contribute to your destruction” is an injunction specifically against suicide and therefore suicide bombings are impermissible per the Quran. However, turning once again to the preeminent Islamic scholar, readers are

¹³² Youssef Aboul-Enein. *Militant Islamist Ideology: Understanding the Global Threat*. Naval Institute Press, 2011 p. 76

faced with a different, authoritative explanation of this verse. Ibn Kathir provided a succinct explanation of what Allah meant by the word destruction: “destruction refers to staying with families and estates and abandoning Jihad.”¹³³ Muhammad Shafi expounded on this verse in more detail:

What does the expression, “put yourselves into destruction”, mean here? Commentators have explained it in different ways. The blessed Companion, Abu Ayyub al-Ansari: “This verse was revealed about us. We can explain it best. It was when Allah gave Islam authority and power, we started talking that 'Jihad' was not necessary any more, and that we could stay home and take care of our wealth and property.” Thereupon, this verse was revealed which made it clear that “destruction” at this place means “the abandonment of jihad.” [...] The same approach to the meaning of this verse has been reported from the earliest authorities in *Tafsir*, such as Sayyidna Ibn Abbas, Hudhayfah, Qatadah, Mujahid, and Dahhak.¹³⁴

The *mufasssireen* explain this verse on “self-destruction” as opposition to abandoning jihad in order to take care of personal affairs or to spend time with family. Admittedly, Shafi does hint at the idea that this verse could be understood as speaking against “suicide” but only in the sense of an individual putting himself in a situation where he will obviously be killed without being able to inflict any damage upon the enemy. He wrote:

Still others think that the verse makes it unlawful to throw oneself into an offensive fighting in a situation when it is already obvious that one will be unable to do anything against the enemy other than dying at their hands.¹³⁵

¹³³ Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim*
http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=229

¹³⁴ Shafi, Vol 11, p. 487-488 <https://ia802707.us.archive.org/2/items/maarifulquran-english-pdf/MaarifulquranEnglishPdf-Vol1-Page485-535ByMuftiShafiUsmaniRah.pdf>

¹³⁵ Shafi, Vol 11, p. 488 <https://ia802707.us.archive.org/2/items/maarifulquran-english-pdf/MaarifulquranEnglishPdf-Vol1-Page485-535ByMuftiShafiUsmaniRah.pdf>

Such a scenario would be inapplicable to suicide bombings because in suicide bombings the enemy (ie. targeted audience) indeed suffers loss.

Finally, those who wish to portray militant Islamists as un-Islamic attempt to prove that the Quran clearly condemns killing of any kind, seemingly ignoring all together the life of their prophet and concluding therefore that Islam is indeed a religion of peace. This is the case of Arsalan Iftikhar, an international human rights lawyer, global media commentator and author of the 2011 book *Islamic Pacifism* and 2016 book *Scapegoats: How Islamophobia Helps Our Enemies and Threatens Our Freedoms*. In addition, he is a faculty member at Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service. In 2009, after the Fort Hood incident, Arsalan published an article for CNN titled *Murder has no religion*. His article began with a reference to Surah 5:32:

Most of the world's 1.57 billion Muslims know that the Holy Quran states quite clearly that, "Anyone who kills a human being ... it shall be as though he has killed all of mankind... If anyone saves a life, it shall be as though he has saved the lives of all of mankind."¹³⁶

The scholars of the *Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi* also cite this verse and use it to chide the Islamic State for killing "many innocents who were neither combatants nor armed, just because they disagreed" with the group's ideology.¹³⁷ The verse in its entirety reads as follows:

For this reason did We prescribe to the children of Israel that whoever slays a soul, unless it be for manslaughter or for

¹³⁶ Arsalan Iftikhar. "Murder has no religion." CNN. 09 Nov 2009
<http://www.cnn.com/2009/OPINION/11/09/iftikhar.fort.hood/index.html>

¹³⁷ Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi, p. 9 retrieved from <http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com/pdf/Booklet-English.pdf>

mischief in the land, it is as though he slew all men; and whoever keeps it alive, it is as though he kept alive all men; and certainly Our messengers came to them with clear arguments, but even after that many of them certainly act extravagantly in the land.

Two points are worthy of particular attention in this passage. Firstly, the teaching appealed to by Arsalan Iftikhar (“whoever slays a soul . . . it is as though he slew all men”) was given “to the children of Israel” (i.e. the Jews) who, according to Islam, received an earlier set of scriptures. Bear in mind, earlier revelation can be abrogated by subsequent revelation should the two conflict. Secondly, even if certain individuals wish to apply this verse to Muslims, when read in context with the very next verse it is in fact a chilling warning to unbelievers. The passage clearly permits killing people who spread “mischief in the land.” The next verse reads as follows:

The punishment of those who wage war against Allah and His messenger and strive to make mischief in the land is only this, that they should be murdered or crucified or their hands and their feet should be cut off on opposite sides or they should be imprisoned; this shall be as a disgrace for them in this world, and in the hereafter they shall have a grievous chastisement. (Surah 5:33)

In light of this stipulation, it becomes necessary to then determine what the expressions “wage war against Allah” and “make mischief in the land” actually mean. Starting with the latter, the Arabic word for spreading mischief is *fasad*. Oliver Leaman, a Professor of Philosophy specializing in Islamic, Jewish and Eastern philosophy, defined *fasad* in his 2009 book titled *Islamic Philosophy* as “moral corruption against Allah.”¹³⁸ In *Sahih al-Bukhairi*, one of the *Kutub al-Sittah* (authentic *hadith* collections), *fasad* is closely linked to “worldly

¹³⁸ Oliver Leaman, “Islamic Philosophy” Cambridge: Polity Press 2009 p. 140

wealth and pleasures.”¹³⁹ Since Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and atheists all reject *shari’a* law -- Allah’s standard of morality -- they all meet the “mischief-making” criterion of moral corruption against Allah by rejecting his moral law and commands and spreading corruption via the preaching of a different message (Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, secularism). In regards to the expression “wage war against Allah,” Islam’s preeminent scholar, Ibn Kathir, explained the following:

“Wage war” mentioned here means oppose and contradict, and it includes disbelief, blocking roads and spreading fear in the fairways. Mischief in the land refers to various types of evil... This Ayah does not save a Muslim from punishment if he kills, causes mischief in the land or wages war against Allah and His Messenger and then joins rank with the disbelievers, before the Muslims are able to catch him. He will still be liable for punishment for the crimes he committed...The correct opinion is that this Ayah [verse] is general in meaning and includes the idolaters and all others who commit the types of crimes the Ayah mentioned...This view supports the opinion that these Ayat [verses] were revealed about the idolaters... “That is their disgrace in this world,” meaning, shame, humiliation, punishment, contempt and torment in this life, before the Hereafter.”¹⁴⁰

In the 1981 Shia *tafsir*, *Tafsir al-Mizan*, Mufti Tabataba’i explained the expression “wage war against Allah” in a similar fashion:

Waging war against Allah: It is impossible to take it in its literal sense; it can only be interpreted metaphorically. But the metaphorical meaning is very wide and it can be applied on

¹³⁹ Sahih Bukhari 7112 (Book 92, Hadith 59) <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/92/59>

¹⁴⁰ Ibn Kathir, Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim
http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=784&Itemid=60

disobeying any rule of the *shari'ah* and on every injustice and extravagance.¹⁴¹

Once again, an authoritative scholar qualified to interpret the Quran, explained that “waging war against Allah” can simply refer to disobeying any rule of *shari'ah* law, the basic Islamic legal system derived from the religious precepts of Islam. Of course, if someone is not a Muslim he inherently does not adhere to *shari'ah*. Therefore, by this standard, he would be considered to be waging war against Allah simply for his rejection of *shari'ah*. By using the explanations provided by the *mufasssireen*, the authoritative experts on explaining and understating the Quran, Surah 5:33 could be read as “The punishment of those who contradict and oppose Allah and His messenger and strive to live a life contrary to that prescribed by Allah is only this – that they should be murdered.” It needs to be emphasized that this researcher is not siding with militant Islamists and their beliefs. The logical progression of each chapter is meant to simply and clearly demonstrate the ease at which the militant Islamist worldview can be supported by Islam’s authoritative texts.

The arguments and accusations against the beliefs and behavior of militant Islamists do not suffice to refute the militant Islamist worldview when viewed in light of authoritative exegesis. These beliefs and behavior have been settled through *ijma* (scholarly consensus)¹⁴² and can no longer be subjected to *ijtihad* (independent reasoning). In expectation of accusations of cherry-picking passages and scholars to support a point, the following defense is given. In regards to passages, this paper has used those passages promoted by the militants Islamists themselves as being in support of their beliefs and behavior. This paper has simply

¹⁴¹ Tabataba'i. Vol 10, p. 160

<http://www.wofis.com/DownloadFilePage.aspx?fileName=asset/Books/Almizan-Final-10.pdf>

¹⁴² This should be understood here as meaning consensus within the explanations of prominent *mufasssireen*

viewed those passages in the light of renowned and widely-accepted exegesis. In regards to the choice of scholars, Chapter VI goes into great detail on the qualifications of *mufasssireen*. There are more than 20 multi-volume classic Sunni *tafsir* in Arabic alone. In searching for a widely recognized and accepted *tafsir*, Ibn Kathir's work was continually praised.¹⁴³ Fortunately for this researcher, Ibn Kathir's *tafsir* has been translated into English--a necessary characteristic of all the *tafsir* considered in this paper. Also, in selecting *tafsir* for this paper, this researcher aimed at representing the broad spectrum of Islamic thought from various time periods. Therefore, this paper also draws from the contemporary Sunni *tafsir* *Ma'ariful Quran* as well as a contemporary Shia *tafsir* by Tabataba'i who is considered by many to be the greatest philosopher in the contemporary Shia world.¹⁴⁴

While only a subset of *tafsir* written since the 7th century, the three *mufasssireen* and their respective *tafsir* cited in this paper nonetheless represent preeminence in Islamic exegesis. Their explanations of the specific passages often cited by militant Islamists in no way demonstrate that the Islamic State or like-minded groups behave and operate in a fashion that could be condemned with absolute authority as being non-Islamic. When the Quran appears to make the case for both tolerance and for intolerance, the passage that came last effectively abrogates the previous revelation.¹⁴⁵ The uncompromising nature of Allah's final commands (Surah 9), which includes Allah's final words on issues relating to war, peace, jihad and submission, means that "abrogation [...] skews Quranic interpretation to the

¹⁴³ See Figure 1 in Chapter VI

¹⁴⁴ Hamid Hadji Haidar. "The Quranic Idea of Peace." University of Reading, 2006, p. 2

¹⁴⁵ Sebastian Gorka. "The Islamic State and Information Warfare: Defeating ISIS and the Broader Global Jihadist Movement", Threat Knowledge Group, 2015 p. 42

militant side.”¹⁴⁶ As militant Islamists continue to promulgate their beliefs, including the duty to fight and kill, to an increasingly receptive audience and demonstrate through authoritative scholars the legitimacy of those beliefs, “it must be assumed that the population will develop a deep understanding of those duties.”¹⁴⁷ Ultimately, using peaceful, pluralistic sounding Quranic passages to oppose the militant Islamist ideology appears to be a fruitless tactic that will leave one beaten down beneath authentic *hadith* and prominent *tafsir*.

¹⁴⁶ Coughlin, p. 123

¹⁴⁷ Coughlin., p. 166

CHAPTER VIII

THE UNITED STATES' CURRENT PSYOP APPROACH

This chapter of the thesis will focus on key elements in the United States' current approach to psychological operations against militant Islamism. The approach will be examined through the lens of the analysis conducted above. A determination will be made at the end of this chapter regarding whether or not the United States' current PSYOP strategy is appropriate for influencing the cognitive domain of our militant Islamist adversary and subsequently changing their worldview to one that produces behavior more favorable to U.S. national security objectives.

On March 15, 2015, a USAF F-16 dropped tens of thousands of propaganda leaflets in support of an operation aimed at discouraging people from joining militant Islamist groups, in this case the Islamic State.¹⁴⁸ According to the Pentagon spokesman at the time, Colonel Steve Warren, "the message of this leaflet [was] that if you allow yourself to be recruited, you will find yourself in a meat grinder... It's not beneficial to your health."¹⁴⁹ The psychological effect sought after was fear and intimidation. The logic behind this approach was the assumption that if a person feared death, and death was certain for those fighting on the side of IS, then the recruiting and retention efforts of IS would suffer. However, the Colonel failed to explain how the threat of death would influence a group of

¹⁴⁸ Mbiyimoh Ghogomu "The US Just Dropped 60,000 of These Propaganda Leaflets On ISIS's Syrian Capital." The Higher Learning. March 30, 2015 Retrieved from <http://thehigherlearning.com/2015/03/30/the-us-just-dropped-60000-of-these-propaganda-leaflets-on-isiss-syrian-capital/>

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, para. 6

people who proudly profess to love death more than the rest of us love life. For militant Islamists, death is not an unfortunate consequence; it is their goal.¹⁵⁰ In multiple places in the authentic hadith Sahih al-Bukhari, Muhammed is recorded as saying the following:

I would love to be martyred in Allah's Cause and then get resurrected and then get martyred, and then get resurrected again and then get martyred and then get resurrected again and then get martyred.¹⁵¹

Muhammed's desire to be resurrected again was not based on the opportunity to achieve a specific goal but based instead on the opportunity to be martyred again.

Prior to the Department of Defense's leaflet dropping operation, the Department of State executed its own online influence campaign known as "Think Again, Turn Away." This effort, under the direction of the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC), utilized social media outlets such as Twitter and YouTube as a platform to demonstrate militant Islamism's supposed lack of connection to true Islamic ideology. Personnel from the center engaged in Twitter conversations with jihadi fighters and their supporters, attempting to contest their claims and dissuade others from adopting the militant Islamist worldview.¹⁵² This effort also included quoting people like Mike Haines, the brother of a slain British aid worker. Mr. Haines was quoted on the campaign's Twitter page as saying "to my limited knowledge, Islam is about peace, it's about love." Unfortunately, this

¹⁵⁰ Oliver Roy. "Who are the new jihadis?". The Guardian. April 13, 2017 Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/apr/13/who-are-the-new-jihadis>

¹⁵¹ Sahih Bukhari 2797 Book 56 Hadith 15. <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/56/15>
Sahih Bukhari 7226 Book 94, Hadith 1 <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/94/1>
Sahih Bukhari 7227 Book 94, Hadith 2 <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/94/2>

¹⁵² Christina Schori Liang. "Cyber Jihad: Understanding and Countering Islamic State Propaganda." Geneva Centre for Security Policy, February 2015, p. 8

strategy was seen not only as ineffective but as an embarrassment. Militant Islamists apparently do not accept exegesis of the Quran from individuals like Mr. Haines.¹⁵³

In 2016, the U.S. State Department launched the Global Engagement Center which is “charged with leading the U.S. government’s efforts to counter propaganda and disinformation from international terrorist organizations and foreign countries.”¹⁵⁴ Much of the center’s work appears to be classified so it is not possible to exhaustively cover all the methods it uses to carry out its mission. However, some of its public initiatives shed light on the center’s approach to decreasing the appeal of IS and preventing recruitment of new members. The center published multiple videos on YouTube with one series that juxtaposed “the images of life in IS-held cities released by Islamic State with images and videos recorded covertly by civilians and reporters in the area.”¹⁵⁵ While these videos discredit the claim of a utopian Caliphate, effective governance is not fundamental to the militant Islamist identity.¹⁵⁶ A second series produced by the center focused on testimonies from defectors and their feelings of manipulation and betrayal on the part of IS. The Global Engagement Center may have certainly achieved the psychological effect of delegitimizing aspects of the Islamic State’s claims and introducing skepticism into the minds of some would-be jihadis. However, as with the first series, these videos do not “target the elements of the Islamic State that are essential to its identity”¹⁵⁷ – its core ideology.

¹⁵³ Rita Katz, “The State Department’s Twitter War With ISIS Is Embarrassing,” Time Magazine. Sept 16, 2014 Retrieved from <http://time.com/3387065/isis-twitter-war-state-department/>

¹⁵⁴ Department of State. “Global Engagement Center” retrieved from <https://www.state.gov/r/gec/>

¹⁵⁵ Makella Brems. “Islamic State Online Recruitment: Narratives and Counter-Narratives.” Claremont McKenna College, 2017 p. 42

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 43

Third party affinity groups, such as the “hacktivist” organization Anonymous have even tried their hand at countering the militant Islamist ideology. Anonymous released a video warning the Islamic State that it would “be treated like a virus,” with Anonymous, of course, being the cure.¹⁵⁸ Subsequently, Anonymous successfully shut down approximately 800 Twitter accounts and 12 Facebook accounts.¹⁵⁹ The psychological effect inflicted on IS with the closure of their Twitter, Youtube and Facebook accounts was not one that elicited fear or doubt. Instead IS made a bold declaration of vengeance, threatening that the virtual war conducted against the group would lead to a real war against employees of the aforementioned internet sites.¹⁶⁰

The ineffectiveness of the above PSYOP strategies is directly related to the lack of understanding by military leaders, State Department officials, and non-state actors alike concerning what actually persuades or motivates militant Islamists. In the militant Islamist worldview the “meat grinder” is not feared, it is welcomed. Certainly, the opinions and interpretations expressed by people like Mike Haines, who admit to possessing limited knowledge and absolutely no exegetical authority whatsoever, are easily dismissed, rejected, and even scoffed at by militant Islamists and those who sympathize with their cause.

Despite the hundreds of millions of dollars spent on U.S. psychological influence operations, the United States has made little or no progress in countering the ideology of al-

¹⁵⁷ Brems, p. 45

¹⁵⁸ Liang, p. 8

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

Qaeda, the Islamic State or any other militant Islamist group.¹⁶¹ While the United States is succeeding in killing its enemies, its psychological operations are not persuasive, its strategy is ineffective and the militant Islamist ideology continues to be promulgated and accepted. For each militant Islamist jihadi killed, there is another eager to replace him. The ideas the United States and its partners are proposing to the militants or would-be militants are not persuading them to abandon their worldview. The United States has based its PSYOP/influence operations on the theory that militant Islamist jihadis have “perverted a major religion into a hateful worldview”¹⁶² and subsequently it has attempted to challenge the militants’ interpretation of that religion. A 2008 issue of the CTC Sentinel shows that this line of thinking has roots over a decade old. In an article titled “A Global Counter-Insurgency Campaign Plan for the War on Terror”, Colonel James Johnson proposed that the United States counter-terrorism campaign’s overarching effort should be Information Operations (the umbrella under which PSYOP falls).¹⁶³ He explains that an IO-based campaign would erode the legitimacy of “radical Islamic ideology” by “neutralizing the ability of radical Islamic organizations to use an extremist interpretation of Islam to justify the use of terrorism in pursuit of their aims” and showing the “hypocrisy of terrorism as a religiously approved tactic.”¹⁶⁴ The United States has correctly identified the enemy’s center of gravity – its ideology. However, when comparing and contrasting what the United States claims about the ideology and what authoritative scholars, specifically the

¹⁶¹ Clint Watts, “Inside Russia’s Fake News Playbook.” The Daily Beast. 27 April 2017
<https://www.thedailybeast.com/inside-russias-fake-news-playbook>

¹⁶² Michael T. McCaul, “A National Strategy to Win the War Against Islamist Terror” Homeland Security Committee, September 2016 p. 33

¹⁶³ James Johnson. “A Global Counter-Insurgency Campaign Plan for the War on Terror.” CTC Sentinel, June 2008, V. 1, Issue 7

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 2

mufasssireen, have written throughout the years, it appears that the United States and its partners have an uninformed, or perhaps misinformed, view of this ideology.

There are nonetheless many contemporary scholars whose understanding and practice of Islam drastically deviates from the militant Islamist understanding of true Islam. As mentioned previously, a letter that was addressed to Abu Barkar Al-Baghdadi in September 2014 and is now, as this thesis is being completed, signed by 172 scholars, strives for a theological refutation of the beliefs and practices of the Islamic State.¹⁶⁵ It has not worked. In fact, since the letter was published the Islamic State in turn has published *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, 25 publications in total, rife with Quranic passages and commentary from *tafsir* supporting its theological position. In the eyes of militant Islamists, the support for their position is so overwhelmingly clear in Islam's authoritative texts and renowned exegesis that they do not even flinch when the global religious community states that IS has nothing to do with Islam. Moderates do not have a monopoly on scholarly support – and neither do the militants. However, it is only from a completely misinformed position that someone can claim that militant Islamists in no way/shape/form are justified in their interpretation and concomitant behavior. Such absolute statements as “IS has nothing to do with Islam” mean nothing and do nothing for the United States' efforts against militant Islamism.

Ultimately it does not matter if the militant Islamists like IS are deviants or not. It does not matter if their beliefs are a true reflection of what the Quran teaches or not. What matters is that they have authoritative, exegetical firepower behind their beliefs. The historical textual support for their belief system is astounding. Their appeal is deeply rooted

¹⁶⁵ Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi, retrieved from <http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com/>

in the Islamic source texts; they “have not constructed for themselves a doctrine ex nihilo.”¹⁶⁶ The militants’ justification for fighting and killing finds full expression in the Islamic texts and the writings of recognized authorities whereas the current approach taken to change the militants’ minds “finds no support able to challenge the doctrinal supremacy that the [militant Islamists] enjoy.”¹⁶⁷ Despite this, many Western policymakers deny the religious legitimacy of militant Islamism and try to discredit militant Islamists using the very same source texts.¹⁶⁸ The inability of U.S. policy-makers and leaders within the Department of Defense and Department of State to properly understand the teachings of the Quran and subsequently execute effective psychological operations when authoritative explanations are so readily available must mean that their ignorance is either a) intentional due to their lack of a desire to study and learn what is written, b) possibly wishful thinking c) the result of oppressive political correctness, or d) due to a combination of all of the above. Regardless of the reason, the result is the same – ignorance and ineffective strategies. Without a proper understanding of militant Islamism and its connection to traditional, historical Islam, U.S. policy-makers cannot even hope to develop and execute an effective ideological counterattack. The United States and its allies will fail every time if they attempt to use contemporary, moderate explanations of the Islamic texts to promote its counter-ideology and delegitimize the militant Islamist worldview. The United States and its allies will fail if they continue to proclaim that there are numerous different interpretations of Islam but the

¹⁶⁶ Katharine C. Gorka and Patrick Sookhdeo, “Fighting the Ideological War: Winning Strategies from Communism to Islamism.” McLean: Isaac Publishing, 2012, p. 10

¹⁶⁷ Coughlin, p. 219

¹⁶⁸ Gorka and Sookhdeo

militants' interpretation is certainly the wrong one – again, scholarly consensus among the *mufasssireen* cannot be ignored.¹⁶⁹

It has already been written, but bears repeating, that this thesis has not attempted to prove that only one legitimate interpretation of Islam exists. It has however demonstrated, through renowned, respected, and accepted scholarship, that militant Islamists have just as valid of an interpretation as anyone else claiming to be Muslim. This fact should prompt the United States to abandon the approach that the Departments of Defense and State have taken over the last five years and pursue a PSYOP approach better designed to influence the emotions, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of our militant Islamist adversaries.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ Coughlin, p. 106

¹⁷⁰ “Joint Publication 3-13.2: Psychological Operations *United States Joint Chiefs of Staff*, Jan 2010 p. GL-8

CHAPTER IX

A DIFFERENT APPROACH

The United States needs to ideologically bankrupt militant Islamism in a fashion similar to how it delegitimized the ideology of the Soviet Union.¹⁷¹ Obviously a host of other factors both political and economic led to the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union, but the United States and its allies nonetheless waged relentless psychological operations against the USSR and exposed many of its core truths to be false. Anti-Soviet PSYOP campaigns resulted in “lowered morale in the Communist ranks, induced defections, [and] increased people’s readiness to assist the West.”¹⁷² This chapter of the thesis is not intended to be a detailed explanation of a fully developed approach to psychological operations that guarantees to turn militant Islamists and would-be jihadis from their violent and hateful ways. Nor does the author intend for this chapter to be too general or vague so as to be useless. The intent of this chapter is to serve as a framework within which policy makers and military leaders could develop an effective psychological operations plan to expose many of militant Islamism’s core truths to be false.

The previous sections of this thesis may have left the reader questioning the difference, practically speaking, between an ideology that actually commands its adherents to violently subjugate people and an ideology that only sounds like it commands its adherents to

¹⁷¹ Gorka and Sookhdeo

¹⁷² Brockmiller, para 9

violently subjugate people.¹⁷³ When reading Surah 9:29, for example, one cannot help but wrestle with understanding the difference between an ideology that commands followers to “fight those who do not believe in Allah” and really means it and an ideology that commands “fight those who do not believe in Allah” but does not really mean it. The same intellectual wrestling match likely happens often with Western-minded Muslims. The writings of those considered qualified to provide an authoritative explanation of the Quranic text, the *mufasssireen*, seem to consider Islam to be the former of the two ideologies – ie. the plain reading of the text is the correct understanding. Could the prominent *mufasssireen* referenced in this paper be mistaken in many of their explanations of the text? Sure, that is certainly a possibility. Islam has indeed evolved and moderate interpretations exist which very likely make up the weight of current scholarly opinion. However this does not negate the fact that there is legitimate scholarly support from 630 AD to present for the more militant understanding of the ideology. Furthermore, any “evolution” of the ideology can be dismissed by militants as *bid’ah*, as discussed at the end of Chapter VI.

Even if it were to be granted that true Quranic Islam is theoretically peaceful, the surface-level reading of numerous Quranic passages, various proclamations of Muhammad himself, and recognized authoritative commentaries often make it indistinguishable from an ideology of brutal oppression and cruelty. Therefore, at the risk of offending certain sensibilities, this researcher submits that the threat from militant Islamism is not rooted in simply a militant interpretation of the Islamic text, but is necessarily rooted in the text itself. If this offends the reader, return to Chapter VI and attempt to explain the text better than those who are recognized by the *ummah*, and literally qualified, to provide an authoritative

¹⁷³ David Wood “Three Questions for Moderate Muslims” 15 June 2016 Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lpR0qbt41es>

explanation. Revisit the letter to Al-Baghdadi by 172 scholars and take note how the scholars condemn Al-Baghdadi and militant Islamists for cherry-picking verses and then proceed to do the very same thing to support their interpretation.¹⁷⁴ If proof-texting and cherry-picking can be used equally as effectively by scholars from divergent interpretations of the ideology, one militant and one peaceful, then the problem lies not with the interpretation, but with the text.

Based on the *mufasssireen*'s authoritative explanations, brutal oppression and cruelty are accurate descriptions of many Quranic passages. This statement in no way equates to an assertion that all or even the majority of professing Muslims are therefore cruel and brutal oppressors, or even that the ideology is itself indeed cruel and brutal. Again, no such assertion is being made in this paper and, on the contrary, it has already been granted in this chapter that true Quranic Islam is theoretically peaceful. The fact still remains that an ideology that is actually peaceful, but is perceived by many adherents and well-respected scholars to command violence, should not be considered less of a threat than an ideology that sounds violent because it actually is. In light of the fact that respected scholars can be cited to validly support both the moderate and militant interpretations of the text, attempting to promote one interpretation over another, in an absolute sense, would be wasted effort. However, if the text that fuels both interpretations were to be refuted and revealed as being altogether false, then it logically follows that any interpretation of the text, most importantly the militant one, would also therefore be false and worthy of abandonment.

The "incorrect interpretation" card can no longer be played; militant Islamists offer a comprehensive intellectual architecture based on established Quranic doctrine to support

¹⁷⁴ Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi, retrieved from <http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com/> p. 1, section 1

their beliefs which are no less legitimate than alternative interpretations promoting a moderate approach to the text.¹⁷⁵ In the card game of proof texting, militant Islamists may not hold the royal flush, but at the very least their bluff is extremely effective. If the Quran were proven false, it follows that militant Islamism would also be discredited as a valid ideology. In 1979, Brigadier General S. K. Malik, then General in the Pakistani Army, wrote in his book the *Quranic Concept of War* that the only center-of-gravity in warfare is “the soul of [the] enemy, the faith system of the enemy.”¹⁷⁶ He wrote that the faith system of the enemy must be crushed in order to win in war.¹⁷⁷ The author of this paper agrees.

The sensitive nature of a government-sponsored campaign aimed at refuting a religious ideology, or as the general put it “crushing the faith system of the enemy,” would necessitate a special program, the existence of which would have to be concealed from both the general public and specifically the target audience, in order to be effective.¹⁷⁸ The actions stemming from such a campaign should never be connected back to the source. A convincing narrative would have to be developed in order to deflect culpability onto a third party which could be another nation state or a fabricated international ideological affinity group.

Instead of shutting down militant Islamist websites or social media pages, these platforms could be hacked by a notional affinity group and used to present ideology-refuting ideas. Militant Islamist propaganda would be replaced by information aimed at sowing seeds

¹⁷⁵ Gorka and Sookhdeo

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 187

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 187

¹⁷⁸ John M. Boehnert, “Influencing Tomorrow: A Study of Emerging Influence Techniques and Their Relevance to United States Information Operations.” U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. 12 June 2015 p. 28

of doubt into the minds of the militants, not by challenging their interpretation of the ideology as that has already been demonstrated to be an ineffective and self-defeating approach, but by challenging the text itself as well as the credentials of the original promulgator of the ideology. An effective campaign should “create confusion among enemy combatants and supporters, exacerbate divisiveness in order to cause the enemy to fight against itself, and destroy the morale of the enemy and its supporters.”¹⁷⁹ As is the case with kinetic targeting (warheads on foreheads) which provides parameters for collateral damage, this ideological targeting would also require parameters for “collateral influence” as non-militants would inevitably be exposed to information stemming from this PSYOP campaign.

The effectiveness of this PSYOP approach is based on one observation and one key assumption. First, as a matter of observation, it is not difficult to find numerous men from various backgrounds willing to die for a lie if they are convinced it is true and especially if it is believed to be divinely inspired truth. It is assumed, however, that it would be extremely difficult to find even one man willing to die for a lie knowing full well that it is a lie or at least very probably a lie. This author’s proposed psychological operations approach against militant Islamism would aim for somewhere in between. While it would admittedly be a difficult task to completely de-convert somebody from their deeply held beliefs, it would be quite feasible to sow enough doubt to at least stifle certain behavior while the targeted audience attempts to process newly acquired information that presents a real challenge to its deeply held beliefs.

The next logical step in this research is to provide examples of information that could be used to challenge the foundations of militant Islamism. This researcher has considered

¹⁷⁹ Sebastian Gorka., p. 37

tactics that range from the use of simple, empirical facts and biological truths to more theologically complex topics. For starters, a simple tactic could involve challenging the divine origin of the Quran. Dr. Hamid Naseem Rafiabadi, former Director of the S.H. Institute of Islamic Studies at the University of Kashmir, wrote the following praise about the Quran in his 2003 book titled *World Religions and Islam: A Critical Study, Part 1*:

The Quran is unrivalled in its recording and preservation. The astonishing fact about this book of Allah is that it has remained unchanged even to a dot over the past fourteen hundred years. No scholar has questioned the fact that the Quran today is the same as it was revealed...Today, the Quran is the only authentic and complete book of Allah. Allah is protecting it from being lost, corrupted or concealed.¹⁸⁰

If a scholar and former university director of Islamic Studies believes such a claim, it is not surprising that many, if not the majority, of Muslims around the world, including militants, believe the same. The claim is that all Qurans are identical and that such preservation is proof of the Quran's divine origin. A popular Islamic guide for non-Muslims, *A Brief Illustrated Guide to Understanding Islam*, commended for being "reviewed and edited by many professors and well-educated people"¹⁸¹ also states that "the Quran exists only in the Arabic in which it was revealed."¹⁸² While this section is not meant to be a fully exhaustive study of the history of the Quran, it will demonstrate that this oft-repeated claim about the

¹⁸⁰ Hamid Naseem Rafiabadi, "World Religions and Islam: A Critical Study, Part 1" New Delhi: Sarup & Sons 2003 p. 236

¹⁸¹ I. A. Ibrahim Abu-Harb. "A Brief Illustrated Guide To Understanding Islam Online" Retrieved from <https://www.islam-guide.com/>

¹⁸² I.A. Ibrahim Abu-Harb "A Brief Illustrated Guide to Understanding Islam." 2d Edition Houston: Darussalem Publishers and Distributors 1997 p 54 Retrieved from <https://www.islamreligion.com/ebooks/islam-guide.pdf>

Quran is indeed false and easily refuted. The point of such refutation in a PSYOP campaign would be to force budding jihadists to question which of their other beliefs may also be false. The end goal would be to remove their eagerness to commit acts of terror in the name of a now possibly uncertain belief system. Dr. Keith Small, a lecturer and researcher at the London School of Theology, noted that “early and medieval Islamic scholarship was quite free in its recognition of textual variation and missing portions of the Quran and did not tend to make claims of perfect transmission.”¹⁸³ Throughout Muhammad’s lifetime, his closest companions recorded his recitations in writing. After Muhammad died, these varying records of recitations “became authoritative versions in their own right.”¹⁸⁴ Cyril Glassé, an American convert to Islam, wrote in his acclaimed *New Encyclopedia of Islam* that “certain variant readings existed and, indeed, persisted and increased as the companions who had memorized the text died, and because the inchoate Arabic script, lacking vowel signs and even the necessary diacriticals to distinguish between certain consonants, was inadequate.”¹⁸⁵ The well-known American Muslim scholar Abu Ammaar Yasir Qadhi explained in his book *An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur’aan* that there are currently five *qira’aat* (readings/recitations) of the Quran in Arabic today.¹⁸⁶ Muhammad himself, according to *Sahih al-Bukhari*, the most authentic of the *hadith* collections, stated that the Quran was

¹⁸³ Keith E. Small “Textual Criticism and Qur’ān Manuscripts.” New York: Lexington Books 2011 p. 6

¹⁸⁴ Small, p. 8

¹⁸⁵ Cyril Glassé “The New Encyclopedia of Islam” New York: Rowman & Littlefield 2008 p. 426

¹⁸⁶ Abu Ammaar Yasir Qadhi. “An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur’aan.” Birmingham: Al-Hidaayah Publishing and Distribution. 1999 p. 199

revealed to be recited in seven different ways.¹⁸⁷ Even today one can purchase various versions of the Arabic Quran. Some are more difficult to find or simply rarer than others, but nonetheless they exist. A psychological effect could be elicited by bombarding militant Islamist social media sites with pictures of the various readings of the same passages from different Arabic Qurans. For a militant Islamist/would-be jihadi who has been told his whole life about, and subsequently believed in, the existence of one Quran, perfectly preserved by Allah throughout time since its revelation, to then see with his own eyes on his favorite jihadi propaganda website a side-by-side comparison of at least five variant Quranic readings, it is plausible to assess that it would arouse in him questions about a book he previously left unchallenged. By presenting him with a refutation of something that he has likely believed his entire life, this tactic would aim to foster enough doubt in his heart and mind to dissuade him from taking any action that may, as he would perceive it, have eternal consequences.

Many Muslims, the militant jihadist type included, are unaware of Muhammad's many scientific insights. Others are actually quick to point out the instances of scientific accuracy in the Quran, proclaiming it impossible that an illiterate, seventh-century leader could have revealed these scientific insights without divine revelation. The majority of Muslims however seem to be either completely unaware of, or perhaps simply turn a blind eye to, Muhammad's numerous inaccurate and easily refutable scientific claims. As the mouthpiece for the creator of the universe, Muhammad certainly should not be excused for erroneous explanations of any natural phenomenon. It is here that the proposed psychological operations campaign could force militant Islamists to question their prophet

¹⁸⁷ Sahih al-Bukhari 3219 (Book 59, Hadith 30), 4991 (Book 66, Hadith 13), 2419 (Book 44, Hadith 9), 4992, (Book 66, Hadith 14), 7550 (Book 97, Hadith 175), 6936 (Book 88, Hadith 18) Retrieved from <http://sunnah.com>

leader. As an example, in Surah 86:5-7, the following revelation of Allah is recorded: “So let man observe from what he was created. He was created from a fluid, ejected, emerging from between the backbone and the ribs.” Some modern-day Islamic apologists assert that the Arabic words of this Quranic passage, such as that of “rib,” have very broad and diverse definitions and are so ambiguous as to preclude a precise definition.¹⁸⁸ However the recognized preeminent Islamic scholar, Ibn Kathir, is not so ambiguous in his explanation of the meaning of this passage. Ibn Kathir explained that, per this passage in the Quran, “the sexual fluid that comes out bursting forth from the man and the woman [proceeds from] the backbone (or lions) of the man and the ribs of the woman, which is referring to her chest.”¹⁸⁹ This fluid is “yellow and fine in texture [and a] child will not be born except from of them (their sexual fluids).”¹⁹⁰ In addition, according to the authentic *hadith* of *Sahih al-Bukhari*, in response to a question posed by one of his followers as to why a child sometimes resembles its father and other times its maternal uncle, Muhammad claimed that the angel Gabriel told him the following:

As for the resemblance of the child to its parents: If a man has sexual intercourse with his wife and gets discharge first, the child will resemble the father, and if the woman gets discharge first, the child will resemble her.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ Bassam Zawadi. “Call to Monotheism”. Retrieved from https://www.call-to-monotheism.com/alleged_contradiction_between_qur_an__86_5_7__and_embryology__by_islamtoday

¹⁸⁹ Ibn Kathir. Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim
http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1200&Itemid=142

¹⁹⁰ Ibn Kathir. Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim
http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1200&Itemid=142

¹⁹¹ Sahih al Bukhari 3329 (Book 97, Hadith 175) <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/60/4>

Either the angel Gabriel, who supposedly revealed the entire Quran to Muhammad, was completely ignorant of human sexual reproduction or Muhammad was lying. Again, many practicing Muslims, more importantly in this case militant Islamists, are unfamiliar with such teachings. While neither of the unusual claims by Muhammad or Allah is likely enough to cause mass apostasy among the militants, mass apostasy is not the measure of success in this proposed PSYOP campaign against militant Islamism. The goal is to arouse questions and cause sufficient doubt to illicit a change in behavior, namely to lessen the commitment the militants have to their belief system. Unlike challenging the militant Islamist interpretation of Islam, an interpretation that, while “wrong”, has been demonstrated to be well established and easily supported by authoritative documents, challenging instead the legitimacy of those documents by means of an internal critique would almost certainly prove more effective in causing militant Islamists to question their beliefs. While a jihadist leader could justify acts of terror by pointing to seemingly violent passages in the Quran supported by the explanations of the *mufasssireen*, he would have more difficulty in justifying the legitimacy of a supposed prophet who taught that a child’s appearance was determined by which of his parents reached climax first.

The goal of challenging the prophethood of Muhammad through a targeted PSYOP campaign would not be to prove to every one of his followers that he was undoubtedly not a prophet, but instead to simply sow enough doubt, particularly into the minds of his militant followers, so that they are less willing to die for what they previously assessed to be certain truth. Another approach to this tactic of challenging the “leader” of militant Islamists would be an appeal to the Jewish Torah, specifically Deuteronomy 18. The reader should understand that verses 15 through 18 of the 18th chapter of the Book of Deuteronomy are

often appealed to by Muslim apologists as proof that the ancient Jewish texts themselves predicted the coming of the Prophet Muhammad. This “proof” supports the Islamic narrative that Islam is the ultimate culmination of the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism and Christianity and Muhammad is the final prophet. The Quran itself states that Muhammad is written about in the pages of the Torah and Gospels.¹⁹² Logically, if the Torah and the Gospels lack any mention or suggestion of Muhammad, then the Quran is false and militant Islamism fails. Muhammad therefore must be in the Torah and, per many Muslim scholars, the place of his mentioning is Deuteronomy 18. The above-mentioned popular Islamic guide for non-Muslims, *A Brief Illustrated Guide to Understanding Islam*, references Deuteronomy 18:15-18 in a section titled “Biblical Prophecies on the Advent of Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam.”¹⁹³ This is important because many Muslims today claim that the texts of the other Abrahamic faiths have been corrupted with time and are no longer reliable. However, by appealing to Deuteronomy, Muslims actually attest to the book’s legitimacy, or at the very least to the legitimacy of chapter 18 as we have it today. It is at this point that the Islamic texts themselves can be used to cast doubt on the prophethood of Muhammad. The *History of al-Tabari* details an event in the life of Muhammad that is quite revealing.¹⁹⁴ Desiring to reconcile himself to his people, the pagan tribe of Quraysh, Muhammad delivered a

¹⁹² Surah 7:157 “Those who follow the Messenger [ie. Muhammad], the unlettered prophet, whom they find written in what they have of the Taurat (Torah) and the Injeel (Gospel)...”

¹⁹³ I.A. Ibrahim Abu-Harb “A Brief Illustrated Guide to Understanding Islam.” 2d Edition Houston: Darussalem Publishers and Distributors 1997 p 33 Retrieved from <https://www.islamreligion.com/ebooks/islam-guide.pdf>

¹⁹⁴ According to the Oxford Dictionary of Islam, al-Tabari was an “early Muslim historian and collector of hadith, a Shariah scholar and jurist... His monumental *The History of Rulers and Kings* outlined the successes and failures of various groups called to follow God, with particular emphasis on the Muslim community; it records the personal decisions of individual Muslims, rather than the actions or decisions of rulers or institutions. The history is largely chronological, with little personal commentary or interpretation, but the selection, arrangement, and documentation of reports offer insight into his views.” Retrieved from <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2292>

revelation from Allah mentioning the approved intercession of *al-Lat*, *al-Uzza* and *Manat*, pagan goddesses.¹⁹⁵ The Quran itself also includes a passage about the three goddesses. In Surah 53 (An-Najm) Allah asks, “So have you considered *al-Lat* and *al-'Uzza*? And *Manat*, the third - the other one?” While this Surah does not mention the intercession of the goddesses, the authentic *hadith* of al-Bukhari records that “the Prophet performed a prostration when he finished reciting Surah an-Najm [Surah 53], and all the Muslims and pagans and *Jinns* [demons] and human beings prostrated along with him.”¹⁹⁶ The reason for the prostration of the pagans is explained by al-Tabari:

When Quraysh heard this [the revelation], they rejoiced and were happy and delighted at the way in which he [Muhammad] spoke of their gods, and they listened to him, while the Muslims, having complete trust in their Prophet in respect of the messages which he brought from God, did not suspect him of error, illusion, or mistake...Those polytheists of the Quraysh and others who were in the mosque likewise prostrated themselves because of the reference to their gods which they had heard.¹⁹⁷

As a result of Muhammad speaking favorably of other gods, he received chastisement from the angel Gabriel:

Then Gabriel came to the Messenger of God and said, “Muhammad, what have you done? You have recited to the people that which I did not

¹⁹⁵ Montgomery Watt and M. V. McDonald, trs. “The History of al-Tabari, Volume VI: Muhammad at Mecca.” Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988 p. 108

¹⁹⁶ Sahih al-Bukhari (Book 65, Hadith 4862) <https://sunnah.com/urn/45400>

¹⁹⁷ Watt and McDonald, p. 108

bring to you from God, and you have said that which was not said to you.”¹⁹⁸

While some Muslim scholars reject the account of al-Tabari as being fabricated, the Quran nonetheless contains the following verse that appears to be a type of justification from Allah for Muhammad’s erroneous revelation:

And We did not send before you any messenger or prophet except that when he spoke [or recited], Satan threw into it [some misunderstanding]. But Allah abolishes that which Satan throws in; then Allah makes precise His verses. And Allah is Knowing and Wise.¹⁹⁹

The preeminent Islamic scholar, Ibn Kathir, in his *tafsir* expounded on this Quranic verse by explaining that “Ibn `Abbas said (in [Muhammad’s] recitation of the revelation) ‘When he spoke, the *Shaytan* [demons] threw (some falsehood) into his speech, but Allah abolished that which the *Shaytan* threw in.’”²⁰⁰ Between the Quran, the hadith, the history of Al-Tabari, and the exegesis of Ibn Kathir, the historical evidence of this story is compelling. The significance of this story is found in the very same book and chapter of the Torah that supposedly predicts the coming of Muhammad. In Deuteronomy 18:20, two verses after the supposed mentioning of Muhammad, God proclaimed to His people “the prophet who presumes to speak a word in My name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.” The chapter goes on to explain that such a prophet has spoken presumptuously and is not to be feared; he was to be

¹⁹⁸ Watt and McDonald, p. 109

¹⁹⁹ Surah 22:52

²⁰⁰ Ibn Kathir. *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim*
http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2494&Itemid=77

regarded as a false prophet. Therefore, the situation is such that if Deuteronomy 18 is true then Muhammad is a false prophet because, according to the Quran, all prophets have spoken falsehoods from Satan in God's name and Deuteronomy 18 proclaims that such prophets are false prophets. If Deuteronomy 18 is false (ie. corrupted text) then the Quran is also false because the Quran explicitly states that Muhammad is mentioned in the Torah, with Deuteronomy 18 alone supposedly fulfilling that claim. Either way, the ideology of militant Islamists fails. Again, while this is not a silver bullet guaranteed to make every militant Islamist an apostate, it may serve well to generate confusion and doubt, destroy morale, and potentially create in-fighting as militants begin to question their prophet and the ideology that he brought to the world.

Regardless of the specific tactic taken, the goal of each would be the same – to implant into the minds of would-be jihadists the idea of “if this [enter foundational ideological principle] is erroneous, what else have I been taught that is also false?” When a militant Islamist begins to doubt the divine origin of his sacred text he will begin to doubt the divine sanctioning of his militant behavior and “a mind troubled by doubt cannot focus on the course to victory.”²⁰¹ For militant Islamists, victory means the subjugation by any means necessary of *kafiruna* (unbelievers). Their victory is what this PSYOP approach aims to prevent. It may seem quixotic to think that a PSYOP campaign could overcome a lifetime of conditioning in order to affect how a person, namely a militant Islamist, views his deeply held beliefs. However, a research paper in the journal *The Muslim World* demonstrates the possibility of overcoming such conditioning. The researchers studied the conversion narratives of 233 former Muslims and found that four of the top nine intellectual and

²⁰¹ Arthur Golden, *Memoirs of a Geisha: A Novel* New York: Random House, Inc, 1999

ideological motivations for leaving the ideology included: the problematic nature of the Quran, the character of the Prophet, the illogical and unscientific aspects of Islam, and the dubious historicity of the Quran.²⁰² Of the 233, 60% converted to Christianity, 28% claimed to be either atheist or agnostic, and 12% adopted other unspecified worldviews; given the nature of the sources of this data, additional research would need to be conducted in order to more accurately determine the most popular conversion destination.²⁰³ Such information, however, could help determine the weight of effort given to the three different approaches mentioned in this chapter within the framework of the proposed PSYOP approach.

²⁰² Mohammad Hassan Khalil and Mucahit Bilici. "Conversion Out of Islam: A Study of Conversion Narratives of Former Muslims." *The Muslim World*, v. 97, January 2007

²⁰³ Ibid.

CHAPTER X

CONCLUSION

In all reality, the approach to Psychological Operations for countering militant Islamism proposed in this thesis paper is not appropriate for the United States, at least not yet and not for the foreseeable future. If the United States' recent efforts against the Islamic State over the past decade are any indication of its PSYOP strategy against the overarching militant Islamist ideology and the future course it intends to take against militant Islamist organizations, then the United States is simply wasting time and effort. While kinetic operations have physically liquidated the Islamic State's caliphate and subsequently diminished the flow of foreign fighters and cyber operations have degraded their online presence, our attempts to refute their ideology and actually change minds (instead of simply blowing them up) have been wasted efforts. Unfortunately, pseudo-altruism along with the almost suffocating political-correctness that imbues contemporary American society, to include our national security organs, would make it difficult to build a team with the necessary skills, resources, and resolve to effectively implement the type of PSYOP campaign described in Chapter IX. Even if such a team were built, somewhere along the chain of permissions and approvals would be an individual who considers protecting feelings more important than protecting national security. Such an individual would inevitably leak information about the operation simply because he or she considered it wrong to persuade others, via sophisticated influence operations, that someone proclaiming to be a prophet approximately 1,400 years ago was himself wrong.

The very same adversary, against whom the United States engaged in relentless and thoroughly criticizing information and psychological warfare, appears to be ripe to employ the tactics outlined above and is possibly the sole force capable of employing non-traditional and controversial methods to discredit militant Islamism. Approximately 20 years ago, the distinguished scholar of Russian thought, Timothy Thomas, wrote:

“[Russians understand] information operations from a cultural, ideological, historical, scientific and philosophical viewpoint. Different prisms of logic may offer totally different conclusions about an information operation’s intent, purpose, lethality, or encroachment on sovereignty; and this logic may result in new methods to attack targets in entirely non-traditional and creative ways.”²⁰⁴

Russian state and non-state actors have already proven their willingness and ability to exploit “history, culture, language, nationalism and more to carry out cyber enhanced [information operations] with much wider objectives [than just deception].”²⁰⁵ Russian military leaders have written extensively about the need in information warfare to control and depress one’s opponent morally and psychologically.²⁰⁶ Russian doctrine stipulates that this is accomplished by conveying “specially prepared information to incline [opponents] to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by [Moscow].”²⁰⁷ This is not to say

²⁰⁴ Timothy L. Thomas, “Dialectical versus Empirical Thinking: Ten Key Elements of the Russian Understanding of Information Operations”, *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 1998, Vol.11, No.1, p. 60.

²⁰⁵ Keir Giles. “The Next Phase of Russian Information Warfare,” NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence p. 2

²⁰⁶ Col. S.G. Chekinov and Lt. Gen. S.A. Bogdanov, “The Nature and Content of a New-Generation War,” *Voyenna mysl* [Military Thought in English Translation], No.4, (October 2013) Retrieved from http://www.eastviewpress.com/Files/MT_FROM%20THE%20CURRENT%20ISSUE_No.4_2013.pdf

²⁰⁷ Timothy L. Thomas, “Russia’s Reflexive Control Theory and the Military,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, vol. 17, (2004): p. 237

that the Kremlin has eliminated the jihadi threat by means of PSYOP. Moscow's approach to anti-militant-Islamism PSYOP is often equally as misguided as the United States'. However, Russia has demonstrated in its doctrine the willingness to exploit any and all information related capabilities and psychological domains to achieve its goals. In addition, Moscow has mastered the concept of ambiguous warfare, through which it is able to obscure its direct participation in conflicts by employing troops and proxies in deceptive and confusing manners as demonstrated by "Little Green Men" in Ukraine and the 2007 cyber-attack on Estonia.²⁰⁸ This capability is vital to the effective employment of the PSYOP approach proposed in this paper. The only adjustment required on the part of the Kremlin, or whichever state or affinity group undertakes this campaign, would be to exchange disinformation for accurate information. Whereas Russia has become notorious for its employment of trolls (human-run online profiles) to exploit social media "in order to plant, disseminate and lend credibility to disinformation," this new approach would require trolls to plant and disseminate easily verifiable and true information.²⁰⁹

Other information related capabilities such as strategic communications, electronic warfare, website hijacking, and a whole host of other disciplines that Moscow executes so well, could be employed in conjunction with PSYOP to influence the perception, beliefs, and behavior of the militant Islamist adversary. This author recognizes that anything that the Russian Ministry of Defense can do, the United States Department of Defense could likely do better. Nevertheless, he also is also convinced that contemporary Western ideals, perhaps

²⁰⁸ Peter Apps. "West Struggles with Russia's Ambiguous Warfare Tactics." Reuters. 2014 Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-nato-security-idUSKCN0JB0BU20141127>

²⁰⁹ Keir Giles. "Russia's New Tools for Confronting the West: Continuity and Innovation in Moscow's Exercise of Power." *Chatham House: The Royal Institute of International Affairs*. March 2016 p. 44

specifically contemporary American ideals, while admirable in many aspects, are actually an impediment in the ideological battle against militant Islamism.

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